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## TO OUR READERS

A new book by an Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW has recently been published. In accordance with our policy, the book will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers:

**FREDERICK MORGAN:** *Poems: New and Selected.* University of Illinois Press. $25.00 (cloth); $12.95 (paper).

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NADINE GORDIMER

# Bennett Award Acceptance Speech, 1986

I am not only honored to receive the Bennett Award; I also am moved by a deep sense of having come full circle in my life as a writer. That is something not too often granted while one is still alive and writing. But it is happening today to me.

My first published stories appeared in American "little magazines" and, since a writer can make no claim to be one until she or he is read, my life as a writer really began in this country of yours, thousands of miles away, which I had never seen. What I knew, what I drew from the country that owns me (for I do not say "my Africa"—it's the other way round)—the sensibility I drew from Africa was remote from the preoccupations of literary theory, fashion and polemics that are supposed to dominate "little magazines." Yet, belonging to no literary circle, ignorant of literary fashion and polemics as I was, "highbrow" America gave me my chance to be read outside my own country.

What I had to offer was not exotic in the accepted sense, either; I did not write of jungles and noble savages, nor did I provide, through a Conradian mode, an opportunity for Westerners to bury their own darkest thoughts in an European concept of Africa. And in the early 1950s, when even Ghana had not yet achieved independence from colonial rule, there was very little outside interest in the political and social enormities hatching in South Africa. In America, Martin Luther King, Jr. was a prophet yet to emerge. Racism meant Nazism. So my writing was not published in American"little magazines" because it was in any popular sense topical or "relevant." It was published for what it was in itself. Whatever was there surfaced unlabelled: the grinding oppression of black South Africans later codified under the sinisterly innocuous euphemism, "apartness"; the courage and audacity of black resistance, and the terrible facts of black suffering, white complicity. My early stories were accepted, here in America, as a small expedition into the terrain of human consciousness, that vast, never-completed, *other* map that arises directly from but is not restricted to the boundaries of geographical cartography. I did not write what was expected of me, because no one expected anything of me; I myself and the place and people that nurtured me were a space in the consciousness of Europe and America. Only the misnamed "little magazines" would have pub-

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lished work like mine, at that time, and it was through publication in them that the world of commercial publishing noticed my work, and that of many other young writers.

Not able to support us materially themselves, the "little magazines" also opened the way for us to earn our living as writers. More importantly, in the end—since it is always possible for the writer to earn not only a living but spurious luxury by burying talent in compromise—the "little magazines" gave us the confidence to stand firm. For if commercial publishers appreciated the worth of our writing as it appeared in those magazines, it was pretty well arguable that we should continue to write according to our own inner dictates. Every decade has its test of artistic integrity. In the fifties, if you could resist the temptation to get paid a thousand dollars by the *Saturday Evening Post* for writing what they wanted, instead of taking (what was it?) a hundred and fifty dollars from *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Yale Review*, *The Hudson Review*, for writing what you wanted, you had earned freedom to be a *writer*. And that is success, the ultimate success . . .

So you see the "little magazines" are not little at all: they are great. They die and are reborn—yes, because they carry the seed of the word and free it, in its simplest, most handy and durable form, to sprout in mutation again and again, and seed again. Without microchip, disc or headphones, the word comes alive when you read a "little magazine" in the New York subway, it sprouts in the overalls of black factory workers in South Africa, in the satchels of students, and brings a new yield of the imagination from those whom talent urges to write. For all these reasons, I am glad to have come full circle and to receive *The Hudson Review* Bennett Award, a tremendous honor from the source of the great "little" magazines which gave me my first recognition.

*The above comments were made by Nadine Gordimer upon being presented with the 1986 Bennett Award at a dinner in New York on April 28, 1987.*

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# Educating the Prime Minister

SOONER OR LATER—MRS. MARGARET THATCHER being the forty-ninth to hold that high office—the British nation will be welcoming its fiftieth prime minister.

Or so, in modern parlance, we are content to say. Strictly speaking, the famous title has been unfamiliar and unofficial until recent times. "Prime Minister" was simply unknown in statutes until 1937, when it slipped unannounced into a minor bill on physical education near the end of Stanley Baldwin's premiership. In the eighteenth century, "First Lord of the Treasury" was among the commonest appellations; and though "Prime Minister" was a usual enough term in Victorian debate, it seems to have begun earlier in English usage largely as a mark of disparagement, smacking as it did of *premiers ministres* of the French kings, like Cardinal Richelieu. Such men had been the favorites of tyrants, to freeborn English ears, and sometimes tyrannical themselves. To this day, in fact, as if to suggest how recent (and perhaps how provisional) the post is, there are no seals of office, the new premier merely kissing his sovereign's hand; and Anthony King, in his new introduction (1985) to *The British Prime Minister*, a collection of essays on the office, has recently complained that historians have paid strikingly little attention to the occupancy of Number Ten Downing Street—compared, say, to that of the White House.

The list of fifty-minus-one starts in 1721 with Sir Robert Walpole, under George I; and including Walpole, there have been forty-nine British prime ministers, of whom forty-eight have been men. Their social origins would repay study. It is a moot point, and perhaps one not to be publicly debated without fear of libel, which of them can justly boast the humblest social origin. My own candidate would be David Lloyd George; but it must be admitted that two or three living contenders would run him close. Ramsay MacDonald clearly has his hat in the ring too, being a bastard, and the only British prime minister to have been one, at least in a technical sense.

Nor, in terms of base social origins, need we stay in the present century. George Canning's widowed mother became an actress, which counted for a good deal less in the years around 1800, in terms of respectability, than a Midlands grocer or a Welsh cobbler. Though British cabinet politics were fully aristocratic in style until the present century, down to the Liberal victory of 1906, they were based on the highly British principle of open oligarchy; and the parentage or grandparentage of leading figures could easily be upstart or alien, like Benjamin Disraeli's. The social question, though

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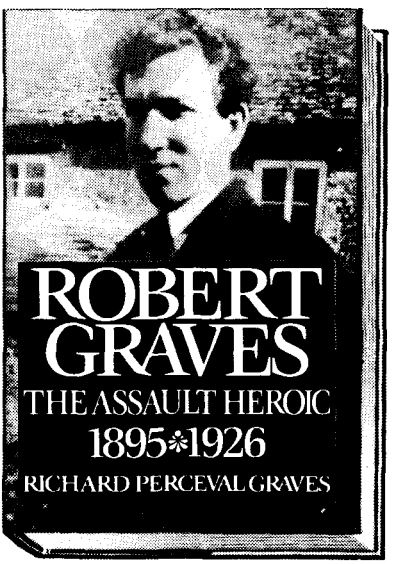


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fascinating, is perhaps too embarrassing to pursue. Here I shall fasten on an altogether safer and more readily quantifiable topic than parentage or upbringing: education, and above all the intriguing place of universities on the long road to Downing Street.

Of forty-nine British prime ministers since 1721, from Walpole to Mrs. Thatcher, twenty-four were at Oxford, fourteen at Cambridge, one at Edinburgh University and ten at no university at all.

That is admittedly an impressive total for Oxford; and the concentration is even greater than the bald facts would suggest. For it is notable that individual colleges within the two ancient universities of England have fared very unevenly. Of the twenty-four Oxford PM's, thirteen (including Gladstone) were at Christ Church, which easily leads the national field and, it is tempting to guess, the international as well. That startling baker's dozen, which has recently included Anthony Eden and Lord Home, presumably illustrates the value of high social connection. Christ Church is a "good" college, in the way that certain ancient families are good. It starts you well. And the hardest step to take in any political career is always likely to be the first.

The second runner, after Christ Church, is Trinity Cambridge—also "good"—which follows with six PM's, and might have had seven had Lord Whitelaw shown more dash in the leadership elections of the Conservative Party in 1975. For third and fourth place Balliol (Oxford) and St. John's (Cambridge) tie, each with three. My present college, St. John's, used to claim a fourth in Lord Rockingham, friend to Edmund Burke—a claim I exclude here as disputed; and I believe it might be said to have done as well, with three, as could reasonably be expected; though it is disappointing to report that the last Johnian prime minister, Lord Palmerston, died in office as long ago as 1865, at the age of eighty, and that there is no sign of another on the political horizon. (The previous Johnians at Number Ten were Goderich and Aberdeen.) Balliol, however, as headmasters used to be fond of saying, could surely do better than three, and it certainly seems to have tried hard in this century, with Asquith, Harold Macmillan (the late Lord Stockton) and Mr. Heath. But there is nothing before or after. A Master of Balliol recently remarked to me that with Jo Grimond, Denis Healey and Roy Jenkins about at Westminster, all Balliol men, it could only be a matter of quick time before his college scored a fourth. But the Master is still waiting.

King's Cambridge, meanwhile, which produced the first prime minister of all in Walpole and which has since become known mainly for its Christmas choir-singing, has sent no one to Downing Street since Walpole departed in 1742. It should now look to itself and reflect, as Mr. Peter Shore doubtless does daily, on what might reasonably be expected of it. But its failure since 1742 is after all

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accountable. For the first four hundred years and more of its existence, it contented itself exclusively with Eton scholars, as its founder Henry VI intended; and scholars need to be poor in order to be scholars. So the failure of King's is the counterpart of the success of Christ Church, and it illustrates the importance of early connection in reverse. Rich Etonians tended to go elsewhere—including Christ Church. But at least King's has done better than Wadham College, Oxford—Mr. Michael Foot's old college. Wadham has never produced a prime minister, and Mr. Foot's bold try in 1983 failed to break the spell.

The performance of Scottish universities is exceedingly disappointing, southern visitors apart, since their one and only clear instance, Lord John Russell, who was a student at Edinburgh from 1809 to 1812, resigned the premiership as long ago as 1866, having succeeded Palmerston only a year earlier. Descended from a Duke of Bedford, he was not a Scot, and would have preferred Cambridge—indeed he told his parents so—having been schooled no further from the Houses of Parliament than Westminster, where he was born; so that his case establishes no strong presumption in favor of the Scottish universities. The phrase about the Exception that Proves the Rule might have been invented for Russell. On the other hand, Mr. David Steel, leader of the Liberal Party, who once studied law at Edinburgh, may shortly remedy the matter. But that would still leave St. Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen out in the cold—except that Lord Melbourne, balked by the inconvenience of the Napoleonic Wars, spent two formative years at Glasgow University after Cambridge; and Campbell-Bannerman, moving in reverse order, studied for two years (1851–53) at Glasgow before going on to Melbourne's old college of Trinity.

It is sad to report that the civic universities, so far as Number Ten is concerned, are an all-but-total blank. Neville Chamberlain was a Birmingham man, but he never attended the University in Birmingham as such, though he took commercial courses in his youth at Mason College, which eventually turned into that university. His brother Austin, by contrast, who was designed by their father Joseph Chamberlain for high public office, was sent to Cambridge, but out of sheer modesty of temperament and a lack of the jugular instinct—qualities still notable in graduates of that university—he never actually became prime minister. And the new or "plate-glass" universities invented by Lionel Robbins in the 1960s are an even worse case, though (being still new) they have better excuses. Britain still awaits its first redbrick or plate-glass prime minister. The record is blank, the *tabula* invitingly *rasa*, and their graduates have nothing to fear from the heavy hand of tradition or the chilling wind of precedent. So far as the highest elected office in the land is concerned, Sussex, Essex, Lancaster and Warwick—not

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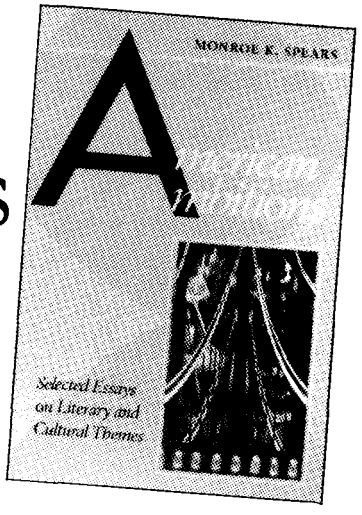
# American Ambitions

*Selected Essays on Literary and Cultural Themes*

Monroe K. Spears

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to mention Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Durham and Southampton—have everything to make and a world to win.

The studies pursued by future premiers is perhaps too random a matter, and too difficult to ascertain, to be worth prolonged attention. Anyone who has ever attempted research into educational history will know that it abounds in evidence of flogging and still direr malpractices, but offers surprisingly little for the serious enquirer craving intellectual improvement. It would be over-ingenious, surely, to connect the Tory ministry and its difficulties with Mrs. Thatcher's study of chemistry at Oxford, unstably compounded of Wets and Dries as her Cabinet may be; and few will think it other than coincidental that Eden, who studied Oriental languages at Christ Church (Arabic and Persian), should have come adrift in 1956–57 over a crisis in the Middle East.

For many, and perhaps most prime ministers before the present century, and even for one or two in this, the answer to the classic academic question "What did he read?" is, in all honesty, "Nothing much." Mrs. Shirley Williams of the Social Democratic Party has yet to demonstrate that Oxford PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) can take one to Number Ten, as it did in the Heath-Wilson era, and as it seems so plainly designed to do. (Mr. Nigel Lawson, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, read it at Christ Church, but with no thought to his future at the Treasury: strange to relate, he specialized not in economics but in philosophy.)

That is not to deny that many British prime ministers have been highly educated. But few, apart from Harold Wilson (late of the Oxford Department of Statistics) have been educated in a specifically academic way. Sir Robert Peel had a carefully trained mind, as much by his father as by any academy; and Gladstone, exceptionally, seems to have been inducted into great ideas by Oxford in about 1830. In *My Life as an Author* (1886), Martin Tupper has vividly described the Aristotle class he attended at Christ Church then. It numbered among its students Gladstone, the Duke of Newcastle, and three future governors-general—Elgin of Canada and Canning and Dalhousie of India—and half a dozen fledgling professors, not to mention Liddell and Scott, "even then conspiring for their great Dictionary": Liddell being destined not only to become the greatest Greek lexicographer of his age, but the father of Alice in Wonderland. Sidney Herbert of Oriel sometimes dropped in, Tupper reports—a future minister of war and colleague of Florence Nightingale; and George Cornewall Lewis too, whom Palmerston was to prefer to Gladstone in 1855 as Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is plainly impossible, at this distance, to judge how much such a classroom of young talents learned from their instructor, how much from one another; but that room by the great staircase of Christ

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Church in Oxford must surely have witnessed a series of youthful intellectual exchanges hardly to be equalled in the history of nations, though now forever lost to view. The book they all read together, as young men, was Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, illustrated by each member of the class (so Tupper relates) with his own apt quotations.

It remains tempting to suggest, nonetheless, that the real influence of universities in the field of political training is not strictly intellectual at all. It is more a matter of whom you meet while you are there. And such contacts can recur for the rest of a lifetime, as if in an Anthony Powell novel. Canning and Liverpool, for example, who were to share Number Ten in the 1820s, had first met as undergraduates at Christ Church in the preceding century.

The ten British prime ministers who attended no university at all perhaps deserve a special word of commendation here. The last was Mr. James Callaghan, who surely counts here, even though he once spent a brief spell at Ruskin College in Oxford. He left Number Ten in 1979 to a member of Somerville College and a woman, who as I write is still there.

Behind him, however, the list stretches monotonously backwards in time through one Oxford man before another: Jesus (Wilson), Balliol (Heath), Jesus (Wilson, again), Christ Church (Douglas-Home), Balliol (Macmillan), and Christ Church (Eden). And then, at last, one arrives with a sigh of nostalgia at Winston Churchill, who finally resigned office in 1955. Like Disraeli, who was one of his heroes, he was never at a university—to his regret. Like Disraeli, again—indeed they are the only prime ministers of which it can be said—he published a novel. His parents, mistakenly supposing him to be deficient in whatever it is that makes a university man, sent him to the military academy at Sandhurst. But he trained his mind through books in early manhood—partly under the willing tutelage of his lifelong friend Lady Violet Bonham-Carter—to become the great master of a celebrated literary style, and he remains the only prime minister ever to have won a Nobel Prize for Literature. And as for universities, he eventually won enough honorary doctorates to stuff a mattress with.

Perhaps Churchill, then, stands to all time as the most striking instance of the non-academic in British parliamentary history, and an abiding example of what universities, of themselves, cannot do.

GEORGE WATSON

*This article was composed before the British general election of June 11, 1987.*

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MAUREEN MULLARKEY

# Tuesday at the Met

The game plan for loitering with intent uptown among the Better Sort has not changed. Married or single, any persuasion, you can still follow the old syllabus: "do" the Modern on Thursday night; Tuesdays, head for the Met. If you have not succeeded with a disarming exchange of *pensées artistiques* by 7 o'clock, there is time left for a quick reconnaissance at the Whitney. Now that the Met has extended its playing field by 50,000 square feet, Tuesday nights are better than ever. These days, you can cruise the Met until closing time—a great advantage in bad weather. In terms of acreage, the new Lila Acheson Wallace Wing for twentieth-century art is not a wing at all. It is the whole bird, stuffed with 22 galleries of opportunity to display alluring remarks on, say, the revolutionary component of the aesthetic dialectic. The seductive potential of so much cubic space is thrilling. All that enticing warehouse éclat! Take your cue from Malraux: "Art is not a submission. It is a conquest." Go for it!

Did New York City, already soaked in galleries, museums and alternative spaces for contemporary work, *need* another modern art condo? One more indoor strolling place for bon tons and *bon viveurs* with a nervous susceptibility to the aesthetic wallop? That is like asking if San Clemente needs the Nixon Presidential Library. The question of need never arises. Orthodoxy holds that art is good for you, like vitamins, a moral tonic. The truth is—art is good for museums. Scrubbed clean of the impacted sludge of imponderable thoughts, art is a hot property. In 1984, Thomas Hoving exulted in *Connoisseur* that American public institutions owned art worth "at least $250 billion." Stephen Weill, deputy director of the Hirshhorn, stated this year: ". . . probably 80 percent of all the money ever spent on art has been spent in the last 10 years. You have a single painting today going at auction for what used to be the gross of a season." Even *Barron's*

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wondered recently on the front page if the auction market had "gone bonkers."

The Met is on the *qui vive* to expand its portfolio of rapidly appreciating twentieth-century work, particularly *contemporary* contemporary. Director Philippe de Montebello is blunt: "Ninety-nine percent of all collectors—the rich, those who are interested and will support museums in the future—are collectors of contemporary art. We are not . . . going to cut ourselves off from the supporters of the future." The quality of work acquired is not a primary issue. High-stakes collectors want their goods enhanced by similar museum purchases. It is in the museum's best interest to effect the enhancement. Aesthetics is a semantic system, sufficiently tractable—amenable to market sentiment—to pose no more of a problem to the Met than junk bonds to Drexel Burnham. The Securities and Exchange Commission does not subpoena the Met's top 10 donors to question conflicts of interest, to investigate insider trading or contain speculative booms. There is little risk of red ink on anything that passes through the Met, possibly on its way to de-acquisition on the auction block. The Met can buy the so-called "cutting edge" in boxcar lots because it becomes CULTURE the instant it goes up on the wall.

The Met's current modern holdings (some 5,000 pieces) are fewer and weaker than the Guggenheim's, the Whitney's or MOMA's (65,000). The new wing was not built to house a collection clamoring for space. It was intended as a lure for patronage. This was an investment decision paid for, in good measure, by New York taxpayers. The city put $8 million toward the total $26 million construction cost. As the Acheson bequest covers only half the $2.5 million annual upkeep, the city will continue to contribute to maintenance. What do the groundlings get for their money? A solid gold mitzvah tank for deep-pocket investors and other Anonymous Donors.

The state's Housing Finance Agency floats low-interest bonds to build housing for the city's own rising population of homeless. The art lobby has it easier. Henry Geldzahler, the Met's first curator of twentieth-century art and subsequently the city's Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, keeps open the pipeline from City Hall. William Lieberman, current chairman of the twentieth-century department, gladhands around

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the high rent district. He uncorks the Charmes-Chambertin and declares "I want it!"[1] over some heavy hitter's *bombe glacée*. Before the crème Chantilly separates, Central Park loses another bit of Olmstead's landscape to a snazzy new building that accommodates—in the astonishing phrase of architecture critic Paul Goldberger—"the needs of art."

*That* is culture.

But what about the ART? The reader complains: you can't show up for work on the art page and make it sound like . . . like cocoa futures. A thing of beauty is a joy forever, said the skylark. Do your job and talk about the stuff on the walls. Say something about that flash upon the inward eye, the light that never was. Isn't this the whole point? What about the mystery of it? the Holy Ghost of it? All that unspotted *arthood*, dazzling in white plumage and radiant with sublime immateriality! Surely *this* makes it all worthwhile?

It would be impertinent to answer that for you. What is said about art—by artists themselves and by a critical establishment, subject to fashion, that denies its role as advance agent for galleries and speculative collectors—imparts a false value that impairs the capacity to see and respond. You can decide for yourself once you are past the Acheson vestibule of posters and cash registers and into the temple precincts.

Proceed in a dignified way and try not to mutter or fidget. If someone asks what you think, don't blurt out anything dumb like: "Soup and fish explain half the emotions in life." Auden can get away with a line like that but not *you*. It will mark you as a dawdling philistine with only one thing on your mind. Remember, you're here for the art.

Emphasis in the wing's first floor galleries is on European modernism, the Met's thinnest area. Here are the "lacunae" the Met apologizes for in its brochure (which includes a solicitation for the "collaboration of friends"). Immediately inside the door is James Ensor's *Banquet of the Starved* that predicts much of the installation. A weakly painted company of gro-

[1] Philippe de Montebello says he says this. See New York *Times*, January 21, 1987, p. C17.

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tesques at an impossible meal is watched over by a sketchy frieze of skeletons playing pool and peeing on flowers. It is thin gruel for the audience, too. Without the wall plaque telling us this is an allegory of privation suffered during World War I, we might not know. You still have to go to MOMA to see what Ensor would do. (*The Masks Confronting Death*, a beautiful and haunted piece, has just been replaced by *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. Both were painted before 1900, an indication of the awkwardness of the date as a cut-off point for modernity.) You have to go to MOMA for Boccioni, for Kandinsky, for too much else. The single conclusion you keep coming to is that things are better elsewhere.

The Met's own early Picassos, all five of them, and its six Bonnards are lined up like elite combat units. Which they are. So are the Derains, Matisse's *Nasturtiums and the 'Dance,'* Gustav Klimt's portrait of Frederika Beer and Vuillard's shimmering tempera painting *Garden at Vaucresson*. (The carefully scumbled surface has the texture of an ancient wall, a precursor to Balthus' later casein paintings.) The rest of the great pieces are borrowed, including the glorious Braques: *The Billiard Table*, that rises up and threatens to fold in half, and *Woman at an Easel*. Loans account for roughly one third of the exhibition and a higher proportion of its strength. The borrowings themselves are more repetitive than comprehensive.

One surprising and rewarding loan is Roger de la Fresnaye's 1911 *Artillery*. Hieratic and stern, without his later work's gaeity of coloration, it is still an exquisite distillation of much that made him unique. Here is La Fresnaye's characteristic stateliness of design, the superb rhythm of a dynamic composition with its balance of interior arcs, the exhilaration of motion. The guns, caissons and cavalry rush along the painting's diagonal axis with the terrible fervor of a generation that was yet to see the trenches. Here, too, is his adaptation of cubist principles to his own purposes: to give depth to recognizable forms without resorting to perspective and chiaroscuro. Many of his great still lives and majestic figure compositions are in this country, the bulk in private collections. MOMA is blessed with *The Conquest of the Air*, a daring and joyous work that coincides with the infancy of aviation.

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His semi-abstract mural design, *Map of the World*, is one of the treasures of the Phillips Collection in D. C. It would be gratifying if the Met offset neglect of this civilized and distinguished painter.

Derain's work is broken up in a way that suggests the reigning estimate of Derain as the odd-man-out of his generation. Hang him with his friend Vlaminck, call him a Fauve and have done with it. Keep him out of the inner sanctum reserved for Picasso, Braque and Matisse. (MOMA, where Lieberman used to work, hangs him the same way.) An early exponent of Fauvism, Derain left it behind to pursue his own deep interest in solidity and volume. The movement away is apparent in the Met's 1905 portrait of Lucien Gilbert. The figure fills the canvas with its own weight, the mass of it undiminished by the decorative dots of color on the coat. For all its Fauvist vivacity, it keeps a formal distance from Vlaminck's escapades in color.

The hanging of Derain's magnificent *The Table* of 1911 plays to the pit. It is an insensitive juxtaposition that diminishes the impact of his contribution to modern art. Grouped with an unmemorable Dufy (see the table?) and a Duncan Grant still life (another table), the placement ranks him as an interesting also-ran. It does no favor to Dufy or Grant either. The autonomous genius of Dufy is missing here. Next to the highly structured Derain, it looks childish. (Keep walking until you find Dufy's *The Wrought Iron Gate*, on loan.) The Grant is fine but built on a different intention and is of a different order of accomplishment. As placed, it is just one more variation on the tabletop theme.

The intrinsic value of Derain's great works—of which the Met's own *Table* is one—is still overshadowed by his eventual defection from cubism and abstraction. The installation views him with the predictable tunnel vision of a survey course in art appreciation. His originality and imaginative achievement are not judged for themselves but, rather, in relation to the styles that won the art historical crown.

The Met's judgment on American art is plain: before it caught up with modernism, it was an endless Midwest. "Insular and provincial," the Met calls it in its catalogue on abstract expressionism. This is the prevailing, ahistorical cliché which

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the museum has no incentive to challenge. (All that pricey gridlock on West Broadway is not caused by Reginald Marsh or Eugene Speicher.) The Met ransacked its own American Wing to stock the Acheson galleries devoted to American art from 1900 to 1945, thus sealing off The American Wing as an attic for historical curios. What could not be laid away in lavender is packed together in the Acheson galleries, like peas in the pantry, with little interest in the achievement of most of the painters sampled. What do we know of Walt Kuhn, co-organizer of the Armory Show, from one still life? The hanging of a single landscape by Arthur Carles, next to Vuillard, dismisses him as a pretty bridge between Paris and Philadelphia. No one would guess that he was a bold colorist ("So damn few people paint with color, and what on earth else is painting for?") and pioneering abstractionist who anticipated Willem de Kooning's women by twenty years. Jacob Lawrence, *still* working, is exhibited as if he had come and gone in the forties. Compare the wall space granted any one of of these under-represented painters with Rauschenberg's 1/4-mile and you know straight off what the limoucades come for. This is Missouri and the Met is not interested in saving the farm. The most it will do is keep it going as a period piece (see how they dressed back then?). There is always an audience for "Meet Me in St. Louis."

There are, of course, some wonderful things here which manage to assert themselves despite the sullen installation: the Bellows, the Hoppers, Guy Pène du Bois's double portrait of the Chester Dales, Rockwell Kent's extraordinary light and powers of selection, John Sloan's crusty view of high-rollers leaving the Hotel Lafayette. But much that is good and enduring is lost in the exhibition's rush to get on with the main event. The installation is designed to show American art in *status viatoris*, on the way to the Kingdom that has not yet arrived. The Kingdom is in the Age to Come—UPSTAIRS! The Celestial City, the culmination of the art historical Reformation, is up over our heads with the New York School, the twenty-foot ceilings and the artist's own titanic-and-universal-never-insular-or-provincial unconscious.

Deference to abstract expressionism encourages the Met to undervalue its earlier holdings. Charles Hawthorne's *The*

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*Trousseau*, painted in 1910 and eligible for the Acheson extravaganza, seems to have been left behind in the limbo of The American Wing. Popular in its time for Hawthorne's tender but unsentimental play on the three ages of man, it remains a startling piece of painting. During the heyday of action painting, Henry Geldzahler wrote it off, in *American Painting in the Twentieth Century*, as "lacking in excitement." There is as much excitement in the painting's few spools of thread or in the amber glazes that round a young girl's bare arm as there is on the entire second floor of the Acheson Wing. It is a regrettable omission.

Equally regrettable is the twentieth century department's refusal to see Guy Pène du Bois as anything but a society painter. Lowery Sims, associate curator, gives him the kiss of death by labelling him less "socially aware" than Robert Henri or Kenneth Hayes Miller. The Brooklyn-born du Bois was quite aware. In his sophisticated, witty and generous way, he could comment on the social stratum (upper) that he painted with the defiance of Daisy Miller. At his best, caste itself is the subject, individuals providing merely the anecdote.

There is a gently astringent quality in *Mr. & Mrs. Chester Dale Dining Out* that matches the sharply delineated, stylized forms. The figures face each other, indicating that portraiture is not du Bois' primary focus. Mrs. Dale, solid as her husband's money, dominates the composition by her posture and enlarged proportions. She leans toward the viewer with all the confidence of station, in charge of the moment and her husband's attention. Mr. Dale—a successful investment banker and prominent art partron—sits with his back against the wall, his lesser bulk compensated for by his reflection in the mirror behind him. The waiter defers to Mr. Dale who yields, in gesture and size, to his monumental wife. She does not require a reflection. Unintimidated and wry, it is an audacious portrait, stunningly painted.

It is safer to poke fun at the ruling class from the inside. That seems to be the point of the decision to hang not one but two of Florine Stettheimer's high-Bohemia cupcakes. It pays to have friends. Florine's was Marcel Duchamp, who directed a posthumous retrospective of her work at MOMA in 1948. Another was Stieglitz (see him in his cape in *The Cathe-*

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*drals of Art*); also Elie Nadelman and Gaston Lachaise, whose works stand nearby in aloof, elegant contrast to the campy *flaneuse* who hostessed New York's avant-garde between the two world wars. A trained painter and *faux naif*, Stettheimer was painting's Liberace: the gold lamé, the practiced flounce, the candelabra lit—no, not to Mother—to Art. That's entertainment.

This mini-installation, on the threshhold of the Met's more-or-less surrealist gallery, would have been the perfect place for John Graham, an influential painter in the thirties and forties. His *Celia* is owned by the Met but unaccountably missing. Graham's imaginary women—over-sized, pin-waisted, with fixed or crossed eyes—are strangely displaced figures. They float unhoused, magically poised between classical portraiture and the surrealism that attracted Graham in the thirties. His sinuous forms are graphic equivalents to the swelling sculptures of Nadelman and Lachaise. It would have been good to see another variation of the modernist impact on a classical sensibility but the Met opted for theatricality instead. It hung a wacky Botero of dancing biomorphs (Nadelman's couple does the tango) which turns the display into an easy night on the town. The wall plaque trills about how much "fun" Botero must have had making this painting.

By using Botero as a song-and-dance man, the Met disguises its overall indifference to Spanish and Latin American painting. It owns Rufino Tamayo's *Children Playing* but chose not to show it. It owns nothing at all by Antonio Tápies—yet it owns and displays Donald Sultan's heavy-handed, cemented knock-offs of the Catalan's darksome evocations of primordial dust and ash. Diego Rivera is represented by a single small cubist piece that could be exchanged for MOMA's look-alike Picasso (*Green Still Life*) with no one noticing. There is no José Orozco, no Joaquin Torres-García, no Carlos Mérida. The list is long.

So is the roster of missing women. It exhibited the three it could not avoid (Nevelson, Bishop, O'Keeffe), added Stettheimer for kicks, threw in three more as Affirmative Action choices and called it quits. (Compare Loren MacIver's milky treatment of Paris rooftops with Leon Kroll's handling of the identical theme to see why Aff. Ac. is not a sound basis for picking art.) Abstract expressionism is presented as a boys'

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club. Ditto surrealism and every other movement. Helen Frankenthaler, originator of the stain-painting technique adopted by Morris Louis, is missing. Louis is hanging instead. Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell—the Met seems to think they did not have the wrist. Leonora Carrington, Dorothea Tanning and Leonor Fini did more than just sleep with Max Ernst. Does the Met care?

The American mural movement, which included a number of talented women, is ignored. The American regionalists do not fare much better. Thomas Hart Benton, for one, worked until the day he died in 1975. The Met pretends he died in 1943, mercifully put away by his student, Jackson Pollock. An urbane, cosmopolitan man, Benton created a public persona as a xenophobic populist, a bit of a hayseed. The Met takes him at his word. *July Hay*, Benton's ode to work and nature, was painted in the same year Pollock made his debut with *Pasiphaë*. It sits in secluded widowhood at the edge of the second-floor staircase opposite the victorious Pollock. This is to remind you, in case you have not yet caught on, that American painting was shelling walnuts before the radicalizing epiphanies of the Tenth Street bunch.

Benton sealed his own doom by dedicating himself to an accessible art. Accessible to whom? To the ordinary man, of course. Good god, who is *that*? Not I, said the fox. Me neither, sniffed every broody aesthete who ever took to his bed with *The Birth of Tragedy*. At a time when the whole purpose of art was to strain the cognoscenti from the rank and file, Benton was the Born Belt Academy, a joke.

On the walls of the Acheson Wing, the Large Thought and the heroic Reassertion of the Picture Plane do not look all that serious any more either. Viewed straight up, without reference to imposing *pronunciamentos* about spiritual goals, the decay of the middle class and volcanic quests for the eternal, abstract expressionism is an inherently decorative movement. And a literary one. This is art-for-art's sake on a Wagnerian scale, elevated above the onus of decoration by cathartic librettos that read like manuscripts smuggled out of Germany in Max Raphael's suitcase.

Take a second look at Motherwell's 1961 version of the long series called *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*. It is placed

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above eye-level, lifted up like a chalice at the moment of consecration. You can almost hear the altar bell. *Hic est enim Calix Sánguinis mei, novi et aetérni testaménti.* But what do you actually see? A huge inkblot comes into focus as a phallus, impressive and well-hung but a phallus nonetheless. (Among malcontents who insist that painting and prose ought to stay as skittish of each other as church and state, the piece is dubbed *Hemingway's Balls.*) It hangs high as a testament to the primacy of . . . rhetoric! By 1961 and among the intelligentsia, the Spanish Civil War had become as much a rhetorical event as abstract expressionism. For Motherwell, the Spanish Civil War, fought by an earlier generation, was "the last time it was possible for one to feel total involvement with history." The war was unique because "Liberal intellectuals felt about it as one man throughout the world." In other words, unless it can be used as an intellectual credential, history is bunk. That was a luxurious posture for an American alive and working in his own country in the early sixties. The stream of nineteen-year-olds fed to the quagmire in Vietnam was beginning then. History would prove as costly to the Big Red One as it had been to the Lincoln Brigade. Motherwell's own contemporaries at "Whites Only" lunchcounters in places like Birmingham and Atlanta understood history differently than the habitués of the Cedar Street Tavern.

We can be grateful for abstract expressionism's pictorial legacy without embracing its ideological one. It bequeathed us the means to take moral stands in the safest, least effectual—hence, least humane—way possible: in our art. By hanging Motherwell's *Elegy* as it does, the Met perfumes the value of its own holding and is party to a dangerous pretense.

When it is not pumping Ab. Ex., the Acheson Wing looks like the club car on Leo Castelli's gravy train. Upstairs and down, Castelli catered the place: Ellsworth Kelly, James Rosenquist, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly. (Julian Schnabel, now with the powerful Pace Gallery—also much in evidence—was launched by Castelli. In addition, the Met owns a Frank Stella, also in Castelli's stable, but did not show it.) As the wing opened to the public, Castelli crowed to the *Times*: "Anyone can discover an artist, but to make him what he is, give him

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importance, that's really discovery." So is commandeering the wing's special exhibition gallery as a Tiffany setting for Rauschenberg's *1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece*. This is purportedly a diary of the sights, sounds—a *total* art work—and materials encountered by Rauschenberg during a recent world trip suffered in the cause of "artistic exchange."

What this *really is* is Pop Art in contented middle age. It draws the blinds on its North Shore retreat and sits down, pipe in hand, to write its memoirs. Pop smooths its Savile Row paunch with a conceited pat and admires the wording of the Haute Museum's plaque: "The message . . . is intentionally ambiguous, allowing viewers their own associations and interpretations. What is evident, however, is Rauschenberg's great interest in contemporary events and strong commitment to peaceful coexistence." This is artspeak for: it does not mean anything at all. Pop, in its snot-nosed youth, used to admit this. That was its charm. Now, with the eternal verities looming closer, Pop covers up. Just like any other stuffed shirt, crammed with significance. I liked Rauschenberg better when he was a Young Turk messing around with dead birds and thumbing his nose at High Art even while he made it.

The gallery set aside for the international *brut* style of while-you-wait expressionism is named "The Age of Anxiety." The names are different (Baselitz, Schnabel, Sultan, et al.) but the work is all by David Salle. Unless it is all by Baselitz. Or maybe the upside-down Baselitzes and Schnabel plate works are different product lines put out by the later Philip Guston. It does not matter. What counts is that the award-winning, international advertising empire of Saatchi and Saatchi owns and promotes each of them. It collects the Castelli Gallery: Frank Stella, Twombly, Warhol (overhead in the sculpture court), Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. It also owns, among others: Eric Fishl, Leon Golub, Susan Rothenberg, Jennifer Bartlett. For anyone wondering what direction the Acheson Wing is likely to take, the handwriting is literally on the walls.

Saatchi, the largest publicly listed advertising agency on the London Stock Exchange—possibly the largest agency in the world—and the creative genie behind Thatcher's election campaign, merits attention. It has become a prime mover in

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determining the *look* and the definition of quality in contemporary art. An early eighties annual report includes Saatchi's *Review of Operations* which is concerned with the development of multinational brand marketing. It asks: what are the opportunities for world brands in culture? how is a world brand managed? As Saatchi knows, the work of art is less significant than its *market status* ("Is the brand perceived as the towering leader in its field, one of a number of acceptable choices, or out of the running?") or its *badge status* ("What kind of people use the brand and what does it say about them?").

While you work your way past all seven of the recently donated Clyfford Stills (one would have done the trick but perhaps Mrs. Still was emphatic), refresh yourself with this excerpt from the Saatchi report:

> Buildings age and become dilapidated. Machines wear out. Cars rust. People die. But what lives on are the brands.
>
> —R. C. Clarke, Managing Director, United Biscuits

Willem de Kooning is well represented, justly so. Everything he ever put his hand to was beautiful, even those ridiculous toothy women from the early fifties. He had that rare thing, a touch that coaxed a certain majesty out of the materials themselves. *Easter Monday* is here (jointly owned by the Met and the heirs of Thomas Hess, Lieberman's predecessor) with its luminous, eddying washes of pale paint over fragments of newsprint. His paint sings all by itself, without need of accompaniment by drawing. And he drew like an angel. Two early works are here (downstairs): *The Glazier* and *Two Men Standing*. Each carries de Kooning's perfect, vital, *descriptive* line that reminds us what is lost when art distends into a vehicle for the worship of the artist's gesture.

It is a pleasure to see Romare Bearden's six-panel tribute to Harlem, *The Block*. Its freedom and sophistication belie notions of Bearden as a "black artist" operating out of a separate-but-equal black aesthetic. He is a technically articulate, gifted man who creates significant art out of the black experience because therein lie his deepest insights and his empathy. His great collages humanize the structures of abstract painting, synthesizing formal dexterity with a deep reverence for

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the lived life. With so much lifeless art all over the city, it seems incredible that New York has had only one Bearden work—MOMA's *Patchwork Quilt*—available to the public. Now there are two. Be glad.

Wonderful surprise—Gregory Gillespie's *The Studio*, wisely snatched from last year's show at the Forum and donated directly to the Met. Perhaps this will encourage the Whitney to display its own two Gillespie paintings, both from 1965, which it keeps hidden. When all the momentary chic in "The Age of Anxiety" has moldered into oblivion, Gillespie will still be there providing the very ground of anxiety: uncertainty over what is real and what is not. This is, in the root sense of the word, a dreadful painting.

Instead of filling a wall with Ellsworth Kelly's *Spectrum*, which looks like an ad for Benjamin Moore, the Met might have given us more of Fairfield Porter. There is only one painting here—Porter's gracious, intelligent portrait of Elaine de Kooning. This is Porter at his best, completely at home with his subject and his materials. And Milton Avery—thank heaven for that white rooster and those bathers all askew! Porter and Avery are similar in that their simplicity derives from that hard-won control of complexity that lesser talents mistake for facility.

Let's leave with the hope that the Met will not continue to exclude Kenzo Okada from its presentation of American abstraction. Okada brought to the canvas a tranquility, an austerity and contemplative grace that set him apart from the more tumultuous New York School. His light-filled, floating pools of color achieve, in their consummate modernity, allusions to seventeenth-century Japanese screen painting. He was internationally recognized in his lifetime and is beautifully represented in the Phillips Collection. The Met's single Okada belongs on public view.

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# The Successful Career of Robert Bly

Robert Bly is one of the most famous and influential poets now writing in America. The author, editor, and translator of over eighty books and pamphlets, Bly has been a constant and outspoken presence in American poetry for the last three decades. Now at sixty, he is one of the few contemporary poets who, like a rock star or sports celebrity, seems bigger than life. Indeed in parts of the academy Bly has already achieved canonic stature. His poetry has entered the curriculum and inspired a sizeable secondary literature of books, dissertations, and articles. He has demonstrated that it is still possible for a contemporary poet to become a public figure.

Bly's fame did not come by accident. He has not only poured immense energy into the solitary act of writing but also into developing his public personality as a writer. No contemporary poet (except Allen Ginsberg) has better understood the value of publicity or used it more aggressively to his own advantage. Bly realized early in his career how important it was for a poet to create an attractive public image independent of his work. There was little fame in the poetry world and many contenders. To become well-known one had to court a broader public—and not by poetry but personality. Bly knew that the mass media would always have room for a few poets, provided they were sufficiently colorful.

Bly created a series of timely public images, each suited to a particular decade. The sixties saw Bly as a fiery anti-war activist; the seventies as a mysterious shaman explaining the myths of contemporary culture; the eighties as a gentle spiritual counselor healing the psychic wounds of modern life. In the meantime, he gave more interviews than a Hollywood starlet, campaigned more miles than a presidential hopeful. He appeared on television, spoke on radio, made recordings, even engineered mass-market mailings to announce his books and seminars. Though he professes a preference for the con-

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templative life, Bly is not shy about sharing his talents. Traveling for months each year to give readings, performances, lectures, and workshops, he has probably reached a broader public than any American poet since Robert Frost.

Although Bly has achieved considerable literary fame, his position in contemporary letters remains curiously ambiguous. His importance to recent literary history seems incontestable, but his achievements as a poet are open to question. No comprehensive account of American poetry since 1950 can ignore Bly's manifold contributions as poet, translator, editor, critic, performer, and personality. One might even claim him as the most influential poet of the sixties and seventies. He helped introduce surrealism into American poetry, popularize Latin American verse, renew interest in literary translation, strengthen the identity of regional poetry from the Midwest, and lead the movement of political poetry during the Vietnam War. He also played a critical role in discrediting the American tradition of formal poetry, offering as an alternative his own vision of poems which would be, as Charles Molesworth has summarized, "more open in form, associative in structure, and ecstatic in intention."

This much Bly has certainly done. The debate begins when one stops chronicling and begins evaluating his achievements. Bly's advocates esteem him as a contemporary Ezra Pound, a multi-talented pioneer, who has used poetry, translation, and criticism innovatively to create an authentic and genuinely new style. His detractors see him an an industrious opportunist, a writer of immense but overwhelmingly pernicious influence and shallow achievement. Such controversy is not unexpected for so prolific and mercurial a writer. While criticism usually clarifies a writer's achievement, in Bly's case critics have been hard-pressed merely to keep up with his latest transformation. But now with the publication of his *Selected Poems* and the appearance of several critical books about his work, the time for an informed and frank appraisal has arrived.[1]

[1] While this essay specifically reviews *Robert Bly*'s SELECTED POEMS (Harper & Row), $18.95, it also refers to work found in several other volumes by and about Bly, especially his anthology, NEWS OF THE UNIVERSE: Poems of Twofold Consciousness (Sierra Club Books), $8.95 and OF SOLITUDE AND SILENCE: Writings on Robert Bly, ed. by *Richard Jones* and *Kate Daniels* (Beacon Press), $14.50.

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Bly's work profits by being seen in the context of his life and background because he is one of the few twentieth-century American poets who has remained deeply rooted in his native landscape. Born in Madison, Minnesota in 1926, the poet grew up on a farm in the tightly knit, Norwegian/Lutheran society of the Great Plains. Although Bly left Minnesota to join the Navy in World War II and then spent more than a decade elsewhere, he returned to rural Minnesota in 1958 and has kept it as his base during his entire public literary life.

For all his later eccentricity, Bly began his literary career in the most conventional way for an ambitious young poet of his generation. In 1947 after a year at St. Olaf's, a stolid Lutheran college in Minnesota, Bly fled his native pastures for Harvard Yard. In those postwar years, Cambridge was the right place for an aspiring poet. John Ciardi and Archibald MacLeish were on the faculty. Richard Wilbur was a university fellow. Bly's fellow undergraduates included John Ashbery, Donald Hall, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and L. E. Sissman, with Adrienne Rich at Radcliffe. Like everyone else literary, Bly competed for the staff of the *Harvard Advocate* and, as always, competition suited him. Eventually the *Advocate* not only made him a senior editor but also published his lively essays and awkward, metrical poems. In 1950 he left Harvard with a *magna cum laude* in English, and, not surprisingly, moved to New York City to write. This relocation proved unsuccessful, and he wrote very little. Several frustrating years later, Bly took the next conventional step and left for the University of Iowa to earn an M.A. in Creative Writing. His time at Iowa remains murky because he has maintained an uncharacteristic silence about this period, consistently skipping over it in his many autobiographical interviews and essays. Perhaps the most telling testimony of his years in the famed Writers' Workshop comes from his current advice to aspiring authors. When asked how to become a poet, Bly now replies that one should go off alone for two years and talk to no one. In 1956, however, having himself spent two years talking to his teachers and fellow graduate students, Bly left with his bride for Norway on a Fulbright. At the age of thirty, Bly seemed headed for a comfortable academic career.

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Europe was the turning point in Bly's creative life. His subsidized scholarly project was to translate Norwegian poetry (although he knew no Norwegian at the time, Bly has never lacked self-confidence). Instead in Oslo he discovered modern European and Latin American poetry, especially the work of Georg Trakl and Pablo Neruda. Returning to the U.S. in 1958, he was filled with a religious mission to reform American poetry. His aim was to push aside the now decrepit "Puritan, American isolationist tradition" of Pound, Eliot, and Williams and replace it with a vital new international style. The old tradition, he claimed, strived for clarity and reason which created "a spare, bare poetry" with few images. The new movement would create "*poetry heavy with images from the unconscious*" (Bly's italics).

Bly saw himself at odds with the literary establishment—both in the academy and in New York—against which he waged a wily generational and geographical war. If rural Minnesota was remote from the center of American literary life, he would then bring it closer to the mainstream of world poetry. If he was a young man with no critical authority, he would discredit the older generation of literary arbiters. Not employed on any faculty, Bly could ignore the restraints of standard scholarly and critical writing and leap instead into polemic, satire, and speculation to accomplish his ends. He would overstep the narrow boundaries of academic departments and explore not only literatures in foreign languages but also ideas from sociology, psychology, and anthropology. He would fight on his own terms to transform the poetic standards of the coming decade.

To accomplish this transformation, Bly began what would become the most influential small poetry magazine of the next decade, *The Fifties* (later updated to *The Sixties* and briefly, before it expired, to *The Seventies*). Though it published the work of other writers, *The Fifties* was largely a one-man show with Bly supplying poems, translations, reviews, editorials, and fillers from cover to cover. For an average issue Bly wrote about two-thirds of the material, mostly under his own name but often under pseudonyms (including that of the arch-critic, Crunk). It was an exciting performance and one which quickly revealed Bly's strengths and weaknesses as a

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writer. His clarity of purpose gave vitality and directness to every page. His intellectual curiosity rejected the conventional limits for literary discourse set by the New Critics. He was not interested in careful, textual analysis but in ambitious cultural criticism. Bly responded to poetry with the whole of his intelligence, frequently making illuminating political, psychological, and sociological observations. One sensed a bold, original mind with a true talent for making unexpected associations. Bly also understood how a living literature needed innovation to avoid stagnation. In *The Fifties* he brought news to American poetry—news of foreign poets, critical alternatives, and revolutionary aesthetics.

*The Fifties* was an overtly didactic magazine, a paperbound church with Reverend Bly permanently at the pulpit. There might be a little poetic music to work up the crowd, but the sermon was the main attraction. There were souls to be saved. Bly's articles were not carefully crafted essays. Indeed the scholarship he proudly flaunts on all occasions often proves embarrassing under scrutiny, as when he analyzes Lucretius' image of "the tears of things" not realizing he is quoting one of Virgil's most famous phrases. The didactic impulse rarely leads to perfectionism, and too often the excitement of Bly's best prose often coincides with an enthusiastic hastiness.

Not only Bly's prose was spoiled by this didacticism. Nowhere are its damaging effects more evident than in his copious translations. In *The Fifties* Bly translated the work of foreign writers, especially those involved in the surrealist and expressionist movements (which had not yet entered the mainstream of American literature) to illustrate how contemporary poems might be written. For all his fascination with contemplative figures like Meister Eckhart, Bly has always chosen action and involvement. As a propagandist for a new poetics, he quickly discovered that translation was more important than his own poetry for demonstrating his theories in convincing, concrete terms. But as a translator, Bly reveals the aesthetic simplification inherent in his "deep image" school of poetry.

Bly's versions usually conveyed the surface sense and images of the original, but the careful shapes of sound which embody them and the nuances of meaning which enliven

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them were largely ignored. The main problem a translator of poetry faces is not in bringing across the surface sense. That task, at least in modern languages, is relatively easy. The difficulty comes in recreating the complex design of sound and connotation that charges the original with energy. Bly usually solved this problem by ignoring its existence. He merely provided prose translations, often curiously awkward ones, lineated as verse. His versions were usually good enough to make a particular critical point. Unfortunately they were rarely strong enough to bring the poetry itself across with the theory. In the pages of *The Fifties*, poetry truly became what got lost in translation.

Is this judgment an exaggeration? Here are the opening stanzas of two famous poems in the original French and German. (I offer two languages to increase the chances that the reader will be able to compare Bly's versions with the original text.) First the opening quatrain of Mallarmé's "Sonnet":

*Sur les bois oubliés quand passe l'hiver sombre*
*Tu te plains, ô captif solitaire du seuil,*
*Que ce sépulcre à deux qui fera notre orgueil*
*Hélas! du manque seul des lourds bouquets s'encombre. . . .*

And now the beginning of Rilke's famous "Der Panther" describing a caged panther in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris:

*Sien Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe*
*so müd geworden, dass er nichts mehr hält.*
*Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe*
*und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.*

Here are Bly's versions. First the Mallarmé:

While the dark winter is passing over the woods now forgotten
Lonesome man imprisoned by the sill, you are complaining
That the mausoleum for two which will be our pride
Is unfortunately burdened down with the absence of masses of flowers . . .

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Now the Rilke:

> From seeing and seeing the seeing has become so
> exhausted
> It no longer sees anything anymore.
> The world is made of bars, a hundred thousand
> bars, and behind the bars, nothing.

As an impromptu translation in a French II oral exam, the Mallarmé might eke out a passing grade, but as poetry in English it fails the most rudimentary test. Not only does it not seem like the verse of an accomplished poet, it doesn't even sound like the language of a native speaker. Nor does the Rilke exhibit the virtues of a smooth literal translation. It transforms the tight, musical German into loose, pretentious doggerel. In the first line, Bly gratuitously introduces awkward, unidiomatic repetitions as equivalents to Rilke's clean phrasing and substitutes a long limp line for the original's appropriately controlled iambic pentameter. ("The Panther" is a poem about the repetition of confinement.) In the second line Bly indulges in more vague, clumsy word play ("anything anymore") and meaninglessly varies the rhythm of the line from his opening, once again betraying Rilke's tight stanza design for no apparent benefit. In the third and fourth lines, Bly yet again shifts the sense of rhythm and lineation with a jerky enjambment falling in the middle of a phrase ("a hundred thousand / bars") before tightening up his syntax suddenly.

If this language is indeed verse, it is verse of the most amateurish variety. Not only are Rilke's subtle repetitions vulgarized in Bly's heavy-handed language, but the intense spiritual identification between the poet and the caged animal is clumsily undercut in Bly's English. In the German Rilke carefully presents the panther as masculine. It is "his glance" on the bars. The image of a thousand bars occurs "to him." Of course this sexual identification comes from the masculine gender of the German word for "panther." But, like other great poets, Rilke uses the deep structure of the language to heighten the meaning of his images. Focusing such subtle

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connotations gives poetry its intensity. Bly, who has repeatedly cited this particular poem as a source for his theory of "twofold consciousness," misses this crucial nuance entirely. While understanding the central idea of the poem, Bly is strangely deaf to the subtler side of its language, and he mechanically neuters this imprisioned masculine panther into an "it," although English grammar can neatly duplicate German in this case, and common American speech uses gender to personalize animals. What can one say about translations so insensitive to both the sound and nuance of the originals?

By propagating this minimal kind of translation Bly has done immense damage to American poetry. Translating quickly and superficially, he not only misrepresented the work of many great poets, he also distorted some of the basic standards of poetic excellence. His slapdash method ignored both the obvious formal qualities of the originals (like rhyme and meter) and, more crucially, those subtler organizing principles such as diction, tone, rhythm, and texture which frequently gave the poems their intensity. Concentrating almost entirely on syntax and imagery, Bly reduced the complex originals into abstract visual blueprints. In his hands, dramatically different poets like Lorca and Rilke, Montale and Machado, not only all sounded alike, they all sounded like Robert Bly, and even then not like Bly at his best. But as if that weren't bad enough, Bly consistently held up these diminished versions as models of poetic excellence worthy of emulation. In promoting his new poetics (based on his specially chosen foreign models), he set standards so low that he helped create a school of mediocrities largely ignorant of the pre-modern poetry in English and familiar with foreign poetry only through oversimplified translations.

Bly's weaknesses as a translator underscore his central failings as a poet. He is simplistic, monotonous, insensitive to sound, enslaved by literary diction, and pompously sentimental. Moreover these are not accidental faults. They are the consequences of his poetic method and they are exacerbated by his didactic impulse. Curiously Bly's prose rarely exhibits these problems. Whatever its intellectual failings, it is usually fresh, vigorous, and diverse. Much of the poetry, however, suffers from being written according to a method.

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As *Selected Poems* makes clear, Bly's earliest work was awful. A few lines written when the young Bly lived in New York City will suffice to show his wisdom in waiting till thirty-five to publish a book:

> There is a joyful night in which we lose
> Everything, and drift
> Like a radish
> Rising and falling, and the ocean
> At last throws us into the ocean . . .

By the time his premier volume, *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, appeared in 1962, Bly had developed a quiet, personal style capable of creating fine short poems within a limited range. The most noticeable qualities of this style were simplicity, coolness, and compression. Even eighty volumes later this strangely unified book remains the central Bly collection, the one most often praised by critics and cherished by readers. Now in its thirteenth printing, it appears on many university course lists. Its contents are frequently anthologized (not infrequently by Bly himself), and in his *Selected Poems*, Bly preserves more poems from it than any other collection. Here Bly created a type of poem which would not only become his trademark but also influence two generations of poets. Here, too, one sees the beginning of the problems which would weaken most of Bly's later work.

"Old Boards" from *Silence in the Snowy Fields* demonstrates the usual Bly manner:

> I
>
> I love to see boards lying on the ground in early spring:
> The ground beneath them is wet and muddy—
> Perhaps covered with chicken tracks—
> And they are dry and eternal.
>
> II
>
> This is the wood one sees on the decks of ocean ships,
> Wood that carries us far from land,

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With a dryness of something used for simple tasks,
Like a horse's tail.

III

This wood is like a man who has a simple life,
Living through the spring and winter on the ship of his own desire.
He sits on dry wood surrounded by half-melted snow
As the rooster walks away springily over the dampened hay.

"Old Boards" like all the "country poems" from *Silence in the Snowy Fields* is short and undeceptively simple. The rhythm is calm and deliberate. All of the lines are end-stopped with the line lengths matching the units of sense. The vocabulary is ordinary and traditional. One cannot find a single word or image which is distinctively modern. The diction is flat and old-fashioned or, to use Bly's more ambitious formulation, "dry and eternal." The tone, like the rhythm, never departs from a cheery peacefulness. Roman numerals have been placed between each stanza to slow the reader down and put each section in isolation. The first stanza presents an ordinary farm scene. Old boards have been laid over the muddy ground to make a walkway in spring. The second stanza equates this commonplace sight with something unexpected, the wood used to build the decks of ships which take men on voyages. The final stanza combines these notions to show how a farmer's seemingly ordinary life also encompasses a spiritual voyage. "Old Boards" is a simple, honest poem. While not particularly exciting or memorable, it has the modest virtues of brevity, directness, and precision.

The problem with Bly's work is that he has rewritten "Old Boards" several hundred times, usually less well. Not only is every poem in *Silence in the Snowy Fields* similar both technically and thematically, but so is most of Bly's subsequent verse. The style which this early book achieved through compression and discipline, quickly relaxed into an uninteresting set of mannerisms. Worse yet, as the style grew more slack, the

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intellectual demands Bly placed on it became more onerous. Bly's "country" style works best for simple, static scenes. It operates in isolated flashes that generate no complex narrative or intellectual energy. Despite their gestures of spiritual profundity, the poems operate too superficially to recreate any but the most elementary spiritual insights, and even these they usually assert rather than dramatize—and, as Bly develops, assert with increasing crudity. Bly's initial clarity and simplicity quickly became pious pretention like this section from "Six Winter Privacy Poems," which opened *Sleepers Joining Hands* (1973):

> There is a solitude like black mud!
> Sitting in this darkness singing,
> I can't tell if this joy
> Is from the body, or the soul, or a third place!

This short poem deserves scrutiny because it is a microcosm of Bly's faults. It begins with the supposedly bold but ultimately corny "deep image" of solitude as "black mud." Anyone schooled in Bly's poetics will know that mud is a positive, profound symbol. It is earthy and elemental, especially when modified by black, the favorite "deep image" color after white. Although Bly's opening line is flat and abstract, he announces his metaphor in great excitement. (One can always tell when Bly is excited. He adds an exclamation point.) He then switches to an image which attests to his spiritual discipline. After all, how many of us desire spiritual growth strongly enough to spend time sitting alone singing in the dark? After one line of such grueling discipline, Bly is properly rewarded by a transfiguring joy which so confuses him that he is unable to determine whether it comes from his body, his soul or, in his inimitable phrase, "a third place" (second exclamation point). At this point the reader may want to go back to the beginning to see what he or she has missed. A second look will probably not help much. One may even begin to wonder what "black mud" is doing in the poem besides sitting around seeming profound. This indescribable quality is apparently what makes it a "deep image." Reaching the end a second time, the reader should simply appreciate the last

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line for what it is, a small masterpiece of bathos, a Hallmark Cards version of mysticism.

This poem also demonstrates the pompous sentimentality that pervades much of Bly's work. In poetry sentimentality represents the failure of language to carry the emotional weight an author intends. There is an excess of some lofty emotion which the reader understands but cannot participate in. Instead the reader remains outside the emotional action of the poem, a little embarrassed by it all, like a person sharing a train compartment with a couple whispering romantically in baby-talk.

This edifying sentimentality is one of the keys to Bly's popularity. Most people like sentimental art, as long as its emotions are stylish. The last century sentimentalized tender emotions like love and pity. This Old Sentimentality is now passé. The New Sentimentality prefers other ennobling qualities like alienation, loneliness, and especially sincerity. But traditional or contemporary, the sentimentalist always asks the reader to experience more emotion than the poem generates. Poets know that many readers will collaborate in the deception. A few bells will suffice to set off emotions readers want to experience anyway.

Reading Bly one continually comes across purple passages of the New Sentimentality like:

> There is a restless gloom in my mind.
> I walk grieving. The leaves are down.
> I come at dusk
> Where, sheltered by poplars, a low pond lies.
> The sun abandons the sky, speaking through cold leaves.

Is is possible for a stanza of poetry to be both unadorned and overwritten? Here every phrase contains at least one heavy-handed hint to the author's mood. (Excerpting these clues, one could easily compose a telegram version of the poem: "Restless gloom grieving down dusk low abandons cold.") But despite its crude overstatement, the language remains weirdly inert for a lyric poem. Characteristically Bly simply asserts his emotions. His utilitarian language does little to recreate them in the reader. Instead, in the manner of the

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New Sentimentality, he tries to bully the reader into an instant epiphany of alienation and self-pity.

If Bly writes this sentimentally about the weather, watch out when he talks about love, as in his recent volume, *Loving a Woman in Two Worlds* (1985). Here the Old and the New Sentimentality meet with truly gooey results. The gap between the intense emotions Bly intends and the tepid language he employs is broad enough for parody, but unfortunately, the poems are not intended to be funny. Sincerity alone cannot save a poem like "Letter to Her" which opens with this stanza:

> What I did I did.
> I knew that I loved you
> and told you that.
> Then I lied to you
> often so you would love me,
> hid the truth,
> shammed, lied.

Is Bly then only a sentimental poet with mystical pretentions? From much of his *Selected Poems* it would appear so, but then in the middle of all the early work one suddenly comes across sharp, startling poems like "Counting the Small-Boned Bodies":

> Let's count the bodies over again.
>
> If we could only make the bodies smaller,
> the size of skulls,
> we could make a whole plain white with skulls in the
> moonlight
>
> If we could only make the bodies smaller,
> maybe we could fit
> a whole year's kill in front of us on a desk
>
> If we could only make the bodies smaller,
> we could fit
> a body into a finger ring, for a keepsake forever.

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This remarkable short poem appeared in Bly's second full-length collection, *The Light Around the Body*, published in 1967 just as the movement against the Vietnam War hit full stride. This moment in American history became crucially important to Bly. His leadership in organizing poets to protest U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia gave him national notoriety. His decision to write political poems incorporating the lessons he had learned from translating Neruda, Lorca, Vallejo, Trakl and others produced his finest poems. And his cross-country trips to give readings against the Vietnam War created in him the hunger for celebrity and attention that characterized his later career. This historical episode was therefore doubly ironic for Bly. The political events, which cheapened the poetry of so many of his contemporaries, invigorated his work, while the occasion for his national fame eventually created the conditions for his literary decline. The politician produced a poet of rare quality just as the shaman degenerated into a showman.

One sees this transformation in the poems from *The Light Around the Body* and the pamphlet, *Teeth Mother Naked at Last* (1970). Several things happen there which rarely occur in his other work. First, the language breaks out of the monotonously literary diction of his "country" poems. Fresh, unexpected words and images appear. Second, the languid mood and syntax of the earlier poems acquire an urgency and excitement. Third, a powerful, illuminating anger disperses the fuzzy sentimentalism that weakens so much of his other work. Finally, Bly's view now broadens from his narrow private concerns to confront the rest of humanity. The poems no longer confine themselves to the easy juxtaposition of the poet alone with nature. They face the difficult world of human history. Bly seemed to be developing from the minor mode of his early work into a major new identity. In the process he wrote a few of the most stunning political poems in American literature—strange, frightening pieces like "Romans Angry About the Inner World," "Johnson's Cabinet Watched by Ants," and especially "Teeth Mother Naked at Last" (which, like many of the *Selected Poems*, has now been significantly revised by the author). Here Bly truly created a new type of American poem driven by stunning images and startling associational

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connections for which nothing earlier in the national literature fully prepared one:

> Massive engines lift beautifully from the deck.
> Wings appear over the trees, wings with eight hundred rivets.
>
> Engines burning a thousand gallons of gasoline a minute sweep over the huts with dirt floors.
> Chickens feel the fear deep in the pits of their beaks.
> Buddha and Padma Sambhava.
>
> Meanwhile out on the China Sea
> immense gray bodies are floating,
> born in Roanoke,
> the ocean to both sides expanding, "buoyed on the dense marine."
>
> Helicopters flutter overhead. The death-
> bee is coming. Super Sabres
> like knots of neurotic energy sweep
> around and return.
> This is Hamilton's triumph.
> This is the triumph of a centralized bank.
> B-52s come from Guam. Teachers
> die in flames. The hopes of Tolstoy fall asleep in the ant heap.
> Do not ask for mercy.

Unfortunately, this exciting phase lasted only a few years. By the time "Teeth Mother Naked at Last" appeared in the volume, *Sleepers Joining Hands* (1973), Bly's political poetry had already dulled into a method as monotonous as his "country" poems. Bly's immense facility had again proven his undoing. The once frightening juxtaposition of myth and politics had become another easy routine. The new style and content were roughly similar to the best poems from *The Light Around the Body*, but the intensity and surprise had vanished. From now on Bly's writing becomes depressing to survey. When he risks large new themes as in the long poem,

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"Sleepers Joining Hands," the work fails (as even he now senses, having broken this "too expansive and excitable" long poem into a number of shorter pieces in the *Selected Poems*). More often Bly remains content to revisit familar themes with increasingly less compression and precision. A book like *This Tree Will Be Here For a Thousand Years* (1979) repeats self-consciously the mode of *Silence in the Snowy Fields*. Nor was this sentimental journey enough. As one of Bly's notes in *Selected Poems* makes clear, a third volume of "country poems" is on its way. This retrenchment would be less disappointing if Bly could still handle this mode as well as he did earlier in his career. Instead one sees a decline in quality as well as failure of real imaginative growth.

Bly's failure to build on the achievement of his best poems and his subsequent decline into self-parody makes *Selected Poems* a major disappointment. Whatever my reservations about Bly, I like the sensibility behind the work. I admire most of his basic values. I delight in his energy and irreverence. I want him to bring his poems to life—to dazzle, frighten and move me. Instead I read page after page of predictable, edifying poetic exercises. The experience would not be quite so bad if I did not hear the author so energetically applauding his own performances. Bly insists on being judged as a major poet, but his verse cannot bear the weight of that demand.

There is nothing subtle in Bly's bid for major stature. He has unabashedly organized his *Selected Poems* to demonstrate his own importance. He argues for this position overtly by chronicling each and every change in his poetry and equating them with growth. (One of the most interesting critical assumptions currently prevalent seems to be that the more a poet changes his work the more he grows in stature.) For Bly there is no subject so thoroughly engrossing as himself, and in recent years even his literary criticism, once so exciting and iconoclastic, has veered into pious autobiography. In *Selected Poems* this compulsion to annotate his own work proceeds unchecked by the Harper & Row editorial department. In only 204 pages of text the author has provided no fewer than 11 substantial prose commentaries. There is an introduction for each of the nine selections of the book plus two "afterthoughts" at the end, short essays which link the poet's tech-

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nique with that of Smart, Blake, Whitman, Baudelaire, Ponge, and Jimenez. Of course, a *Selected Poems* should advertise a poet's achievement. Usually, however, a volume accomplishes this by presenting an author's best poems and letting the reader evaluate them. From the organization of this book, however, it would seem that Bly distrusts either his readers or his own work.

What use is poetry that cannot speak to its contemporary audience without the support of intermediary prose? Perhaps these insistent commentaries are only the miscalculations of an overly eager author. But in Bly's case even a sympathetic reader may begin to wonder about what is really going on. Reading the commentary in this volume is like watching a ball game from the stands while listening to someone describe it on the radio. The announcer, however, seems to be describing an altogether different game, one much more exciting than the hum-drum contest down on the field. One should not be too surprised though. It is just that gift for self-marketing that has built Bly's successful career. Some readers enjoy the sales pitch enough to accept the poetry on faith. I advise a more critical reading of these *Selected Poems*. There are a few breathtaking moments here as well as many quiet revelations. If only one did not have to push through all the dullness and pretention to find them or shut out the author's eager guided tours along the way. Bly's best poems make this volume worth the effort, but, unfortunately, it is an effort.

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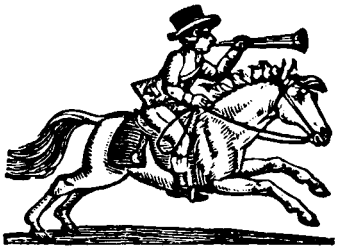

# Parnassus: Poetry in Review

## Fall/Winter 1986

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ALAN SHAW

# Phaedra in Tact

Richard Wilbur's translations of classic French drama are among the undiscovered treasures of our recent literature. I say undiscovered in spite of the success his Molière versions have had on the stage, a success that has made them standard for English-language performances of those plays, at least in this country. But if one were to ask, who has written the best rhymed dramatic verse in modern English, I doubt that many would immediately think, as I do, of Richard Wilbur. Of the three arts that his versions excel in—the art of translation, the art of versification and the art of writing for the stage—it would be hard to say which current literary fashion cares least about, or is most ignorant of.

A few years ago Wilbur turned his attention to Molière's great contemporary, Racine. His translation of *Andromaque*, while it has received praise and been performed on several occasions, does not yet appear to have shared the success of his Molière. This is not surprising, for a number of reasons. The play itself is unfamiliar outside of France. And it is tragedy. One of the great delights of the Molière translations is their wit, a spice that is necessarily missing from the Racine. And it must be confessed, I think, that Racine simply does not yield to even the best translator to the degree that Molière does. For all its finesse, the dialogue of Molière's verse comedies is, compared to Racine's, approximate: it is possible to think of equally clever ways of saying the same things, and Wilbur not infrequently thinks of cleverer ones. Racine's choice of words is beyond being clever or clumsy: it is simply unbetterable. In France, no one except actors remembers long passages from Molière by heart. Situations, and an occasional *bon mot*, are what stick in the mind. Racine is one of those poets, like Homer or Pushkin, about whom it is often remarked that in his own language he seems to get memorized almost without conscious effort. And the words remain

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in the mind long after the situations they refer to have grown hazy. Such poets, of course, have always been considered to be the most untranslatable as well.

All this applies in some measure to *Andromaque*, Racine's first tragedy; how much more so, then, to his greatest, and one of the supreme works of French literature, *Phèdre*, which Wilbur has chosen for his latest, and certainly most arduous, venture in translation.

Many translations of *Phèdre* exist, and I cannot claim to have read them all, but this is by far the best I have seen, and the only one that takes Racine on his own terms. To dwell on what is lost would be impertinent. A good translator is like a good shipmaster: on meeting the impossible, he knows just what portion of the wealth to jettison so that the vital cargo can slide safely over the rocks. In Pasternak's Russian, Shakespeare is shorn of a good part of his luxuriance and magnificence of expression, but his meaning comes through intact; the translations are speakable and hold the stage. Many poets aspire to translate big classical works, but few have the tact or the understanding of larger poetic structures to make such decisions reliably. Modern poetry builds no ships and carries no freight, and modern poets, if they cannot have the jewels, would just as soon the whole business sank to the bottom. It is interesting in this regard to compare Wilbur's approach to *Phèdre* with that of his late contemporary, that remarkable poet and supremely tactless translator, Robert Lowell.

Here is how Lowell begins his *Phaedra*:

> No, no, my friend, we're off! Six months have passed
> since Father heard the ocean howl and cast
> his galley on the Aegean's skull-white froth.
> Listen! The blank sea calls us—off, off, off!
> I'll follow Father to the fountainhead
> and marsh of hell. We're off. Alive or dead,
> I'll find him.[1]

[1] *Le dessein en est pris: je pars, cher Théamène,*
*Et quitte le séjour de l'aimable Trézène.*
*Dans le doute mortel dont je suis agité,*
*Je commence à rougir de mon oisiveté.*
*Depuis plus de six mois eloigné de mon père,*
*J'ignore le destin d'une tête si chère;*
*J'ignore jusqu'aux lieux qui le peuvent cacher.*

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And here is Wilbur:

> No, dear Theramenes, I've too long delayed
> In pleasant Troezen; my decision's made.
> I'm off; in my anxiety, I commence
> To tax myself with shameful indolence.
> My father has been gone six months and more,
> And yet I do not know what distant shore
> Now hides him, or what trials he now may bear.

About the only thing Wilbur's prim Hippolytus has in common with Lowell's swashbuckler is the name. Which Hippolytus is Racine's? Considering that the son of Theseus is everywhere cited for his modesty, dutifulness and austerity, it would seem as though Lowell should have known he was getting off on the wrong foot. Could there be something more full-blooded in Hippolytus, something that Lowell exaggerates, but Wilbur misses?

To give readers without French some basis for comparison, here is a fairly literal blank verse rendering by George Dillon:

> Resolved: I am leaving, dear Theramenes.
> My sojourn in delightful Troezen is ended.
> In this anxiety, this mortal doubt,
> I begin to be ashamed of my idleness.
> More than six months away from my father, I know
> Nothing of what befalls so dear a life,
> Nor even in what place he may be hidden.

A version such as this cannot convey a very sharp sense of character (indeed that is its main defect), but it can show, in a rough way, how far and in what direction Lowell and Wilbur respectively depart from the original phrasing. It should be clear at once that Lowell's version is an extravaganza. Evidently feeling that modern poetry, or the English language, could do nothing with such tame material as is given in these lines, he loads them with all the gems he can think of—howling oceans, skull-white froth, and so on. But what about Wilbur? Doesn't he go too far in the other direction? Doesn't he take an understated original and understate it even more?

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Yes, he does. And in doing so he has made the right decision, I believe. Every style has a strategy; in translating it one had better run the risk of overdoing that strategy than choose one directly counter to it. And it is definitely part of Racine's strategy to understate things and constantly to use—we might as well say it—clichés.

Our modern horror of clichés is so great that we are apt to forget what an important ingredient they are in most styles we characterize as classical. The Homeric style, with its hundreds of stock phrases for every situation, is the extreme example, certainly. English is atypical in that its classical poet, Shakespeare, is not, in this respect, very classical at all, and this no doubt accounts for some of our present feeling on the matter. In prose, however, English has more than one example to show of a fine classical style that makes a liberal use of clichés; one of the best is Jane Austen's.

Now Miss Austen's clichés cannot be called lazy; you have never seen such hard workers. They can take shorthand, without calling the slightest attention to themselves; they can, when they are in high spirits, poke fun at themselves and at those around them; they can even, on occasion and in the right company, grow surprisingly lovely and elegant. Racine's clichés are too high-bred to poke fun, but they are no less versatile, and their ability to show a sudden radiance even (or especially) when hardest at work is their most astonishing quality. It is qualities of this kind—harder to achieve than any amount of skulls and froth—that Wilbur quite deliberately, if not always quite successfully, sets out to achieve.

In these lines, both he and Racine, I think, must be judged successful:

> I hoped by death to keep my honor bright,
> And hide so dark a flame from day's pure light.[2]
> Act I, scene 3

The conventional lights and darks of Phaedra's imagery attain—by pure concentration as it were—a striking inversion when she qualifes her flame as "dark." Lowell translates:

[2] *Je voulais en mourant prendre soin de ma gloire,*
*Et dérober au jour une flamme si noire . . .*

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. . . I cried
For death to save my glory and expel
My gloomy frenzy from this world, my hell.

Besides losing Racine's bizarre image of the dark (lit. "black") flame, this misses the real reticence in Phaedra's nature that makes her helpless passion so moving, a reticence mirrored in her clichés; in trying to make her sound less hackneyed, Lowell only makes her sound more so.

In the realm of language, nothing is ever built entirely out of fresh timber, though Shakespeare, drawing on all the sources with which Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians and Normans had littered his island, could give the impression of creating a new idiom for every occasion. Racine, with only a small but sturdy stock of Latin at his disposal, does not even try to do this; his language shows instead, like the French language itself, what can be done by using a minimum of thoroughly seasoned wood.

Just as the economy of his method dictates that he never use a new expression when a cliché is in order, so it dictates that he never use a synonym when the same word is required. And this, in turn, though equally at variance with our own taste in the matter, gives rise to some equally characteristic effects.

The word *jour*, for instance, which Wilbur translates above as "day's pure light," reappears throughout, and in some of the most famous lines of the play:

The daylight [*jour*] is not purer than my heart.[3]
Act IV, scene 2

Death dims my eyes, which soiled what they could see,
Restoring to the light [*jour*] its purity.[4]
Act V, scene 7

As we can see, Wilbur, under the constraints of meter, rhyme and idiom, translates it slightly differently in each of

[3] *Le jour n'est pas plus pur que le fond de mon coeur.*
[4] *Et la mort, à mes yeux dérobant la clarté,*
*Rend au jour qu'ils souillaient toute sa pureté.*

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these cases. But he is at least aware of the identity, and readers of his remarks about the "'purity' . . . both she [Phaedra] and Hippolytus associate with the *jour*, the clean light of day," or of similar remarks by other commentators, would know, from his translation, what was being talked about. Where would such readers be if they had to rely on Lowell? In the first instance, as we have seen, he substitutes "this world, my hell"; in the second, distracted by a thought of his own, he omits the comparison entirely;[5] only in the third instance does he translate, with comparative fidelity:

> My eyes at last give up their light, and see
> the day they've soiled resume its purity.

It is not my purpose here to belittle one of our finest poets. But it is so often assumed that Lowell's kind of extravagance, the kind Ezra Pound often, though not always, indulged in before him, is the only alternative to free verse, prose, or just plain pedestrian versions of foreign poetic classics in English, that it seems important to show in some detail just what disastrous losses it can entail, and how, with a little tact, such losses can be avoided, without losing the whole ship. Poets like Pasternak have given, in their own languages, more than one example of tactful, metrical and speakable translations of verse drama; Wilbur's are almost the solitary example of this kind in English. And it is precisely, I think, because he has stood somewhat apart from the tradition of English-language poetry in this century, the tradition of Eliot and Pound and Lowell—of the brilliant fragment shored against the ruins—that he has been able to achieve this.

As Jane Austen knew, as every storyteller knows (modern poets by and large tell no stories) the chief advantage of a conventional diction is its transparency. Shakespeare's plotting is leisurely, and he can afford to forego this advantage at times. Racine, like Austen, has never a moment to lose. There are always so many things going on at once, both on- and off-stage and (most of all) in his characters' heads, that he cannot risk a single word or expression, however striking, that does not instantly serve to make the situation a little clearer. His

[5] and puzzled by my love of purity . . .

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characters have no time to reflect, as Shakespeare's do, about the larger issues; it is their pathos and destiny to be always utterly and hopelessly involved. And in the end, more than any individual jewels of expression, it is this transparency, this urgency—along with a constant care for speakability and sound—that makes Racine's language so memorable. Even when we cannot remember clearly everything that it refers to, a tremendous psychological charge seems to linger in its every vowel and consonant.

Clichés, a small vocabulary, speakability—by what other arcane devices, beyond the ken of modern poetry, does Racine achieve, and Wilbur convey to us, this memorable charge of meaning? Well, finally, there are his couplets. Wilbur, doubtless weary of defending his use of rhyme in each successive translation, does not devote many words to the subject in his introduction to *Phaedra*. But we should now be able to rid ourselves once and for all of the notion that Racine's couplets can be dispensed with in English, on the grounds that they are merely decorative or musical, that the job they do can be done better by blank verse, free verse, or any other kind. No, Racine's couplets are not, properly speaking, even a part of his prosody at all; they are a part of his rhetoric, almost a part of his grammar. It is as if language, in his hands, grows another conjugation, one that cuts across, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes qualifying or contradicting, the human grammar. For this special grammar is not the grammar of the impassioned individual; it is the grammar of something larger against which that individual struggles and is measured. Perhaps we can call it, as Wilbur does, "an ideal of high and orderly consciousness"; in the end, perhaps, it is the grammar of the stars, of the elements, of time. Listen to the urgency, as well as the dignity, lent to Phaedra's final speech as she marshals every cliché to tell the whole sad story before the last inexorable couplet shall have conjugated itself:

> Hear me, my lord. I have but little time.
> I was the lustful and incestuous one
> Who dared desire your chaste and loyal son.
> Heaven lit a fatal blaze within my breast.
> Detestable Oenone did the rest.

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She, fearing lest Hippolytus, who knew
Of my vile passion, might make it known to you,
Abused my weakness and, by a vicious ruse,
Made haste to be the first one to accuse.
For that she's paid; fleeing my wrath, she found
Too mild a death, and in the waves is drowned.
Much though I wished to die then by the sword,
Your son's pure name cried out to be restored.
That my remorse be told, I chose instead
A slower road that leads down to the dead.
I drank, to give my burning veins some peace,
A poison that Medea brought to Greece.
Already, to my heart, the venom gives
An alien coldness, so that it scarcely lives;
Already, to my sight, all clouds and fades—
The sky, my spouse, the world my life degrades;
Death dims my eyes, which soiled what they could see,
Restoring to the light its purity.

A little of the music is lost, to be sure. But a great poet's music is only the last shimmer over a terrific cargo of meaning. Thanks to Wilbur, Racine's cargo is intact, and it is up to actors and actresses to restore the electricity.

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HAROLD FROMM

# The Lives and Deaths of Charlotte Brontë: A Case of Literary Politics

Although the Ego, the Self, the Author, and even the Book have—in some circles—been disposed of as fictions in the aftermath of Derrida, Barthes, and Foucault, a reading of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* could easily convince us that there's still a lot of life in those hastily dismissed concepts. For if anything can be said to hold these novels together to produce their strange, unique power, it is the mesmerizing force of Charlotte Brontë's literary Self, a world-creating Word straight out of Coleridge's romantically infinite I AM. Charlotte Brontë's twentieth-century next-of-kin can only be D.H. Lawrence, another moral-erotic dynamo who taxed the dams of conventional respectability.

Brontë's power is indeed manifold, for she has survived the many uses to which she has been put for more than a century. Regarded as impious, "coarse" and risqué by some of her contemporaries, venerated by Mrs. Gaskell as a model of filial piety and Christian self-sacrifice, treated as neurotic by some post-Freudian psychological critics, kicked up and down the Liberation Mountains by various schools of feminists, and subjected to "Marxist" readings by armchair revolutionaries, she still can overwhelm us as the "genius" that some have claimed her to be. Even *The Professor* emits sparks and *Shirley*, whatever its problems, displays a virtuosity that can still inspire awe. And for some readers *Villette* is the great masterpiece, a bold ancestor of the psychological novel.

When Elizabeth Gaskell, however, began to write the first biography of Charlotte at Mr. Brontë's request in 1855, her disposition was to stay far away from Eros and to treat Charlotte as a saintly exemplar of Christian devotion to duty and virtue. Mrs. Gaskell, who had come to be a good friend of Charlotte during the last few years of her life, was too close to the Brontë circle to be able to consider Charlotte principal-

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ly as a famous novelist. Her own emotional ties and her own religious temperament caused her to focus on the terrible ordeal of the serial deaths of the Brontë children and Charlotte's role as survivor. Furthermore, both Charlotte's husband of less than a year, Arthur Bell Nicholls, and her father, Patrick Brontë, had sensibilities that required protection, and this reined in Mrs. Gaskell's treatment of a number of delicate subjects. In addition, Mrs. Gaskell's knowledge of Charlotte's intense erotic attachment to her Brussels schoolmaster, M. Heger, was much greater than she was willing to indicate, nor were the complete texts of Charlotte's revelatory letters to him to become public until the early twentieth century. Although a very great deal has been made of these letters, perhaps the strongest conclusion yet to be reached was announced by Tom Winnifrith in 1983, on the basis of a poem he discovered at the Berg Collection: ". . . Charlotte Brontë probably on the evidence of the Berg manuscript contemplated adultery."[1]

Of Mrs. Gaskell's dilemmas in facing such intimations, Alan Shelston remarked that "she is forced, in this period of Charlotte's life, to positive manipulation of the evidence surrounding other issues—notably Branwell's decline—to provide an

[1] Edward Chitham and Tom Winnifrith, *Brontë Facts & Brontë Problems* (London & Basingstoke, 1983), p. 12. This poem is in a very unfinished state, but the basis of Winnifrith's claim can be gathered from a few stanzas:

> But wild and pathless was the space
> That lay our lives between,
> And dangerous as the foaming race
> of ocean's surges green. . . .
>
> I dangers dared, I hindrance scorned
> I omens did defy;
> Whatever menaced, harassed, warned
> I passed impetuous by. . . .
>
> I care not then how dense and grim
> Disasters gather nigh
> I care not in this moment sweet,
> The hate, the love, the joy, the sweet
>
> Though all I have rushed oer
> The wrath I had passed oer
>
> Should come on pinion strong and fleet

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explanation of Charlotte's psychological state."[2] Also, Mrs. Gaskell did not see fit to say very much about Mr. Brontë's handsome and personable young curate, William Weightman, who for a while, at any rate, exerted some charm over all the Brontë sisters. The contrast between him and another Brontë curate—Arthur Bell Nicholls—did not lend itself to expansive treatment.

What seems curious, however, to the twentieth-century reader of Charlotte's letters and the more recent biographies is that she had in reality very little of the conventional religiosity that Mrs. Gaskell so esteemed. As a clergyman's daughter, of course, she had been surrounded by a world of religious "discourse formations." She knew the Bible backwards and forwards (and turned it to forceful literary use) and she had mastered all the accepted religious sentiments. But she is rarely convincing when she utters them, either in her fiction or in her life. Writing to her best friend, Ellen Nussey, about her poor health in London during one of her infrequent escapes from the isolation of Haworth and the demands of her father, she remarks: "Sometimes I have . . . been tempted to murmur at fate which condemns me to comparative silence and solitude for eleven months in the year—and in the twelfth while offering social enjoyment takes away the vigour and cheerfulness which should turn it to account. But circumstances are ordered for us, and we must submit." This is a very characteristic religious obeisance, but in her novels religion is almost never chosen in preference to passion. And when it *is* chosen, it is apt to be a vehicle for passion, as in the famous scene in *Villette* in which the Protestant Lucy Snowe confesses to a Catholic priest—in sheer desperation. (Indeed, Winifred Gérin makes a good case for this confession—which actually took place while Charlotte was in Brussels—to have been an explicit admission of guilt for her love for M. Heger.) Or it is apt to have an air of inauthenticity, as when the concluding sentiments of *Jane Eyre* are devoted to the repellent and narcissistic evangelist, St. John Rivers, as though Charlotte felt it were her duty to appear to support him although *she personally* preferred the world. Even with these

[2] Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, edited by Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1980), p. 30.

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gestures, however, many of her contemporary readers felt her to be "irreligious." Gérin reports of Charlotte's benefactor, Mrs. Atkinson, who paid for much of the cost of her education at Roe Head: "In later years when she came to read *Jane Eyre* she was appalled at the secular nature of the work and the scant respect paid to the Cloth, and severed all connexion with the author."[3] In an ironic way these readers were right after all. For as a late Romantic, Brontë was more concerned to harness her affective energies to the interests of the self rather than to those of that lily-livered old Victorian God.

Well over a hundred years passed before Mrs. Gaskell's life of Charlotte Brontë was followed by another major biography, one which, oddly enough, did not herald a revolution but rather consolidated the findings of a century and brought that era to a close. In a decade that had already become highly politicized after an extended period of relative stability, Winifred Gérin's magisterial achievement of 1967, though criticized for its own omissions and attenuations, exhibited what can only now be seen as an extraordinary neutrality. For as a result of the publication of the Heger letters, of Fanny Ratchford's books on the Brontë juvenilia, the preoccupation with psychoanalysis in post-World War II literary circles, and the subterraneous rumblings of the feminist and neo-Marxist movements, what had solidified for so long into The Life was soon to break up into the lives, most of them serving as vehicles for one or another ideological mission. But though it reflects one individual's personality and point of view, Gérin's biography can hardly be accused of pushing a cause. Rather, Gérin saw her task as using twentieth-century discoveries in order to put an end to the perpetuation of old myths, especially since she regarded Mrs. Gaskell as unreliable and as someone who "would never wholly be able to conquer her novelist's tendency to romance about ordinary things." (p. 416) Instead, Gérin provides substantial quantities of new or previously unintegrated materials. Thus, she has a great deal to add about the Brontës' juvenilia and their bearing upon the mature works; the influence of various artists and writers on Charlotte's fiction; the backgrounds of Charlotte's friends

[3] Winifred Gérin, *Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius* (London, 1967), p. 67.

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and employers, like the Nusseys, the Taylors, the Sidgewicks; the pensionnat in Brussels where Charlotte spent much of two years; the characters of M. and Mme. Heger and Charlotte's obsession with him. (More than a hundred pages are spent on this subject alone, a subject almost completely avoided by Mrs. Gaskell.) Perhaps Gérin's most remarkable achievement is her keen use of the novels to illustrate her treatment of the life, a biographical technique that more often than not breeds distrust. Because her knowledge and use of the texts, however, inspire such confidence, when she informs us that William Crimsworth's remark about erotic triangles in *The Professor* derives from Charlotte's recollection of her brother's debauchery and drug-induced death, it is hard to doubt her. "Limited as had yet been my experience of life," Crimsworth notes, "I had once had the opportunity of contemplating, near at hand, an example of the results produced by a course of interesting and romantic domestic treachery. No golden halo of fiction was about this example, I saw it bare and real, and it was very loathsome. I saw a mind degraded by the practice of mean subterfuge, by the habit of perfidious deception, and a body depraved by the infectious influence of the vice-polluted soul." (p. 297)

Gérin, like virtually every one else who has written on the Brontës, is harshly criticized for factual unreliability by Tom Winnifrith. In *The Brontës and Their Background* (1973) Winnifrith writes, "Miss Gérin's most damaging fault is her reliance on untrustworthy printed evidence,"[4] such as the Shakespeare Head edition of Charlotte's letters. This might be a worthwhile criticism but for the fact that Winnifrith is the sort of scholar who regards almost everything as questionable, waiting for all the data to be corrected and all the facts to be in before he can begin to read in earnest, rather like Kierkegaard's would-be believer who is awaiting final factual verifications while on his deathbed. Twenty pages later, however, in a lucid moment he remarks: "Though it is easy to show that a complete and reliable edition of Charlotte Brontë's letters is a necessary preliminary to any scholarly study of the Brontës, it is much harder to suggest what should be done in

[4] Tom Winnifrith, *The Brontës and Their Background: Romance and Reality* (New York, 1973), p. 6.

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the absence of such an edition." (p. 25) Winnifrith's immensely useful book provides indispensable materials on the Brontës' religion, reputation, social class, publishing history, critical response; indeed, he is probably today's leading Brontë scholar. But in his quest for absolute accuracy, he says and unsays everything, *seriatim*. After more than one lengthy harangue about the crimes of T. J. Wise, one of Charlotte Brontë's shadier editors, who altered editions to make them seem firsts, misused manuscripts, and attempted to pass off the juvenilia of one Brontë for that of another, Winnifrith concludes of the Brontë juvenilia that "it does not matter a great deal who wrote what." (p. 17) Or "It is a mistake to look for parallels between Charlotte's life and her novels. . . . But it would not be too fanciful to conjecture that it was from Henry Nussey, who after all did think of becoming a missionary, that Charlotte derived her Calvinistic fears in the same way that Jane Eyre heard Calvinistic doctrines from St. John Rivers." (p. 21) One's head aches after 200 pages of this sort of thing.[5] And it is one of those crowning ironies of academic absurdity that after countless remarks like "Mrs. Gaskell was not a professional scholar, trained to give an accurate transcription of documents," (p. 1) Winnifrith's recent re-editing of the standard Shakespeare Head edition of Charlotte's poems (1984) should be accused of vast numbers of inaccuracies and mistranscriptions by a correspondent to *TLS* in the issue of August 23, 1985. *Sic transit insolentia academica*!

Despite his criticism of Gérin, Winnifrith's own work belongs to the same truth-finding tradition as hers, while Margot Peters' *Unquiet Soul*, which appeared in 1975, came into being in the midst of a feminist revolution. If Gérin saw Charlotte from the outside looking in, Peters presents Charlotte from the heart of her own feminine subjectivity. Thus, her narrative is passionately intense, a psychological or phenomenological account rather than a "documentation." Peters

[5] To Winnifrith's credit, he remarks ten years later, in connection with the poem he discovered at the New York Public Library, referred to above: "I have previously poured scorn on those who have sought to draw parallels between the lives of the Brontës and their works, and upon those who have sought to draw conclusions about the novels from a study of the Brontës' juvenilia and poetry. The Berg manuscript as it stands makes this scorn a little premature." Chitham and Winnifrith, *Brontë Facts*, p. 11.

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also makes different use of the letters and the novels, seeing (with much justification) more feminist material than Gérin, comprehensive as she was, could even begin to hint at. But Peters is not so involved with her subject as to slight historical and psychological complexities. Reacting to Charlotte's indignant reply to Harriet Martineau's censure of *Villette* for its obsession with love, she writes:

> Charlotte's violent reaction to Martineau's criticism was typical of the curious double-thinking of her age. While many writers challenged convention on one or two fronts, virulent Victorian piety and prudery forced them at the same time to shore up their defenses higher on others. Thus Mrs. Gaskell found nothing wrong in writing about an unwed mother in *Ruth*—a novel that was greeted with cries of outrage—but believed in her heart that Charlotte wrote coarse novels. Charlotte could see nothing indelicate in her own novels but was repelled by Harriet Martineau's atheism. Harriet Martineau took her atheism as a matter of course but was disgusted by the love emphasis in Charlotte's novels, and, later, unreasonably vicious over George Eliot's liaison with George Henry Lewes. Elizabeth Barrett Browning cried out against woman's role in *Aurora Leigh* yet condemned *Jane Eyre* as savage and free-thinking.[6]

What finally impresses us about these three biographies is the necessity of reading all of them.

In 1976, only a year after Peters, Helene Moglen's *Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived* appeared as if to italicize the rapidly evolving feminist-psychological *Zeitgeist*. Moglen's book opens up the novels by means of penetrating readings that relate the qualities of the fiction to Brontë's personal development, even convincing us that the novels we regard as the masterpieces achieve their success because of the author's superior self-awareness in weaving their complex web. The faults of *The Professor* and *Shirley* can indeed seem to derive from the author's own irresolution and evasion in facing the problem of selfhood as a dependent woman in a patriarchal society, although it is perhaps an unfair accusation against someone as sensitive to these anachronistic priorities as Brontë herself.

But Moglen's book is otherwise sadly crippled by the over-

[6] Margot Peters, *Unquiet Soul: A Biography of Charlotte Brontë* (New York, 1976), pp. 423-24. Reprint edition.

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wrought psychoanalytic clichés of its programmatic analysis. Addicted, for instance, to reifications of psychoanalytic metaphors, Moglen compares the relationship of Charlotte and Branwell with the incestuous one of Byron and his sister Augusta. In the case of the Brontës, however, "Theirs was not an incest of body but of mind: an incest of the imagination." (p. 39) This sort of wild swinging that takes images for things can only undermine the reader's confidence. What, after all, is an "incest" of the imagination and what has it to do with physical incest? Such metaphoric license hurtles the book toward its self-parodying finale: "Nine months after her marriage, Charlotte Brontë conceived a child and fell ill of the conception: sickened, apparently by fear. It was the last of her neurotic illnesses; the last of her masochistic denials. Love had come too late. . . . On March 31, 1855, at thirty-eight years of age, in the early months of pregnancy, Charlotte Brontë died. She could not bring to birth the self she had conceived."[7]

Moglen's programmatics herald an era in which "culture criticism" and "death of literature" polemics start to flood the literary scene (literature becomes inseparable from culture as a whole). A good specimen of this phenomenon is Terry Eagleton's *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (1975). In his polemical introduction, he remarks: "I read Charlotte's novels as 'myths' which work towards a balance or fusion of blunt bourgeois rationality and flamboyant Romanticism, brash initiative and genteel cultivation, passionate rebellion and cautious conformity; and those interchanges embody a complex structure of convergence and antagonism between the landed and industrial sectors of the contemporary ruling class."[8] Eagleton applies to the novels the well-known antinomies of Charlotte's character and fiction—dominance and submission, attacks on the aristocracy combined with a respect for their gentility, defense of middle-class radicalism tempered with criticism of *parvenu* presumption, etc., etc.—in the way that Moglen applies criteria of self-realization, and he ar-

[7] Helene Moglen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1984), p. 241. Reprint.

[8] Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (London & Basingstoke, 1975), p. 4.

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rives, not very surprisingly, at a similar ranking of their merits. But what is of most special interest about Eagleton's handling of Charlotte Brontë is that despite the elaborate Marxist mugging and twitching that mar his work in general, what is least new or illuminating in this criticism are those very ideas that he insists on as Marxist-generated. Since it is not necessary to subscribe to his ideology in order to come to most of Eagleton's conclusions, his Marxist obbligato often seems merely puerile, whether in this book on the Brontës or in his brilliant *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Indeed, before any of his Brontë writing appeared in print, Tom Winnifrith had already dealt with most of these tensions in Brontë's novels: "We shall find a similar dichotomy in Charlotte's social philosophy; she does not believe in existing rigid class divisions, but does believe that good birth is important," and so on.[9]

What makes Eagleton's work so notable, however, both here and elsewhere, is his astuteness as reader and critic. One can almost be tempted to believe again that there really is such a thing as "literary merit." For despite his emphasis on class struggles, he does not lose sight of the command of literary form and conventions that produces masterpieces. Like an orthodox Christian compelled to attribute all his talents to God, Eagleton (though not a modest type) ascribes all his insights to Marxism, but such quaint modesty is just a *pro forma* feint, a party-line afflatus, since no methodology will turn a dim-witted critic into a bright one. Summing up the prevailing structure of all the Brontë novels as a struggle between romance and realism, Eagleton rightly concludes:

> 'Romance', I am aware, is a crudely inadequate term; but I mean by it merely the passionate self's free, eloquent expression, in contrast to that calculative rationalism which I designate as 'realism'—the analytic adequation of means to ends in the name of worldly progress. All the 'higher' characters are Romantic in this sense: they manifest a rich fluency of selfhood, a flair, *brio* and flamboyance which in its overriding of rationalist meanness wins the heroine's envying wonder. The heroine admires this life-style because she lives it also—but lives it as a guilty secret, as submerged, unspeakable fantasy. (p. 76)

[9] Winnifrith, *Brontës and Background*, p. 50.

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We tolerate Eagleton's programmatic self-delusions because we realize that it is intelligence, not doctrine, that makes him so enjoyable to read. Capitalism is getting good value for its subsidy of his writings. And now that he has become an establishment literary presence (in a way that Fredric Jameson has not) his neoconservative phase cannot in any case be far off.

Eagleton's polemics seem merely nugatory, however, when placed alongside those of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their 1979 *magnum opus*, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination*. Here, Charlotte Brontë is given the most extensive treatment of any of their writers—more than 125 pages as well as numerous *passim* references. The reader who is not already a member of their party must feel both overawed by their scholarship and flattened by their resistless polemical steamroller. Rarely have brilliance and bombast been so forcefully combined.

Their accounts of women writers present, moreover, an unresolved epistemological dilemma: the authors are addicted to wordplay and punning (particularly Sandra Gilbert) in the mode of Derridean deconstruction. And indeed, they *are* attempting to deconstruct certain conventional responses, mostly nineteenth-century, to women writers.

> The roots of "authority" tell us, after all, that if woman is man's property then he must have authored her, just as surely as they tell us that if he authored her she must be his property. As a creation "penned" by man, moreover, woman has been "penned up" or "penned in." As a sort of "sentence" man has spoken, she has herself been "sentenced": fated, jailed, for he has both "indited" her and "indicted" her. As a thought he has "framed," she has been both "framed" (enclosed) in his texts, glyphs, graphics, and "framed up" (found guilty, found wanting) in his cosmologies.[10]

Unfortunately, this quaintly animistic writing, with its throwback to Adam naming the animals, seems to confuse essences with words while at the same time presuming to be at the cutting edge of postmodern self-consciousness. But whereas Derrida, for whom there is nothing outside the text, can afford to play around with words because for him there *isn't* anything

[10] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London, 1979), p. 13.

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else, Gilbert and Gubar are trying to convince us that there is indeed a great deal outside the text: for example, history, social conventions and the effect of both upon women's roles. And so this uncontrollable and antithetical wordplay tends to undercut the authors' apparent aims, to reduce much of their treatment of the past and of literary texts to a trivial esthetic game. Whereas their real epistemology and their real ontology are presumably entirely serious, their rhetorical strategies are misappropriated from the decadence of academic deconstruction, which pretends not to believe in "truth" or "reality," as *they* surely seem to do. This opposition between serious substance and frivolous style leaves the reader uncertain as to whether they are ultimately aiming at feminist reform in the world or whether they are only, after all, contemporary incarnations of ivory tower academicism—trendy, playful, but in the long run, inconsequential.

Perhaps their most successful treatments of Brontë's novels are Sandra Gilbert's account of *The Professor* and Susan Gubar's of *Shirley*. Much insight and careful reading lie behind these, despite the inevitable feminist reductions: "Though Brontë may not have consciously admitted this to herself, through the medium of Crimsworth she suggests that a female is a servile and 'mentally depraved' creature, more slave than angel, more animal than flower. And—the book implies, even if Crimsworth/Brontë does not—she is like this because it is her task in a patriarchal society to be such a creature." (p. 322)

From *Jane Eyre*, which is more or less the keystone of their book, the authors derive their title, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. *Jane Eyre* tells a "distinctively female story of enclosure and escape, with a 'morbidly vivid' escape dream acted out by an apparently 'gothic' lunatic who functions as the more sedate heroine's double." (p. 314) This notion of a "double" is one of the book's half-dozen pervasive ideas.

> As we explore nineteenth-century literature, we will find that this madwoman emerges over and over again from the mirrors women writers hold up both to their own nature and to their own visions of nature. Even the most apparently conservative and decorous women writers obsessively create fierce and independent characters who seek to destroy all the patriarchal structures which

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> both their authors and their authors' submissive heroines seem to accept as inevitable. . . . The madwoman in literature by women is not merely . . . an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather, she is usually in some sense the *author's* double, an image of her own anxiety and rage. (p. 78)

It is ironic, however, that Gilbert's powerful reading of *Jane Eyre* should dissipate force rather than concentrate it by its insistence on Bertha Rochester as Jane's double, a role that most readers will simply not *feel* as they read the novel. "What Bertha now *does*, for instance, is what Jane wants to do. Disliking the 'vapoury veil' of Jane Rochester, Jane Eyre secretly wants to tear the garments up. Bertha does it for her. Fearing the inexorable 'bridal day,' Jane would like to put it off. Bertha does that for her too," (p. 359) and so on. Yet these equations are less than convincing because Gilbert overlooks the differences in quality and motivation behind such outward similarities. It is this willingness to overlook disparities in order to support a program, that ultimately does so much damage to the credibility of Gilbert and Gubar's accounts.

Though even Susan Gubar's enlightening description of *Shirley* is harmed by this disposition, it is her treatment of *Villette* that causes the reader particularly to question the rationale of their whole enterprise. Dense with scholarship and allusion, Gubar's reading of *Villette* makes every word of the literary text portentous, bowed by the weight of centuries of palimpsestic cultural accretions, until it seems the very articles and expletives are sodden—in this case with feminist significance. The nun in the attic, Mme. Walravens, the actress Vashti—everything becomes a smothering apparatus of equal importance. One is hard-pressed to believe that this is a novel by Charlotte Brontë rather than by James Joyce.

> As an androgynous "barbarian queen" possessing demonic powers associated with Eastern enchantment, Madame Walravens resembles Vashti, for she too is an artist, the creator of crafty plots which result in the death of her characters. Her malevolent plotting, however, only solidifies the connection between witchcraft and female artistry, since the source of the witch's power is her image magic, her *buried representations* that cause weakness, disease, and finally death for the represented victim. With all her egotism and energy, Madame Walravens seems to be a black par-

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> ody of the artist, perhaps of the author herself, because her three-foot height recalls Brontë's own small stature (four feet, nine inches). At the same time, with her silver beard and masculine voice, she is certainly a sort of male manqué, and having attained power by becoming an essential part of patriarchal culture, she uses her arts to further enslave women. (p. 432)

This is heavy going indeed, carrying the reader past incredulity to the brink of despair. Gilbert and Gubar, for all their scholarship, their insight, their often powerful reading of texts, rely on a tissue of loosely strung conceits, played with, reiterated, litanized to hypnotic effect and too often mistaken for reality. As we turn the pages of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, this tissue disintegrates, falls apart, and one remembers the conceits as if they were striking images retrieved from dreams rather than as coherent guides to real or esthetic experience.

With the last item in this twenty-year Brontë retrospective, we take an engaging detour from polemics. John Maynard's *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality* explicitly distances itself from Moglen, Eagleton, Gilbert and Gubar and other programmatics, making free use of whatever insights they have to offer, while rejecting their dogma. In this regard we benefit from the best of several worlds without the need to accept the orthodoxies of a true believer. Starting from Brontë's juvenilia, especially the novelettes, Maynard sees the writings as suffused with eroticism and sexuality, indeed, sees these as their most salient defining qualities. In *Jane Eyre* he shows us how the Reed sisters, Bertha, Rochester, St. John, as well as Jane herself, constitute a spectrum of diverse modes of sexuality. In *Villette*, Mesdames Beck and Walravens, de Hamal, Ginevra, Vashti, Graham, Paulina, M. Paul, the painting of Cleopatra, etc. etc.: at almost every turn we are presented with distinctive erotic sap. Maynard acutely reveals how the restrictions of the era and the accusations of coarseness after *Jane Eyre* reinforced Brontë's already strong tendency to use coded metaphors to stand for sexual qualities. "Whereas D. H. Lawrence felt able to begin to use images of genital organs directly to speak about differences in sexuality, Brontë could only expand the intrinsically sexual aspects of other parts of the body until they stood for sexuality as a whole. The heart, especially, always associated with love and feeling, becomes in

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*Villette* a kind of sexual organ, a measure of the potency and warmth of the entire person."[11] Indeed, in her own characteristic way, she is seen by Maynard as offering "the fullest and most sophisticated discussion of sexual issues of any major Victorian writer before Hardy." (p. viii) In the juvenilia, "Writing truly for private publication, for that unblushing audience of three sibling fellow authors, Brontë could and did write with freedom on issues of sex and scandal that she, and far more her fellow respectable authors, dared not exercise in published works." (p. 40) The "world below" of the Angrian fantasies "was a world called up almost in scorn of the world of girls' schools, country isolation, and restriction in which Brontë lived." (p. 41)

The pervasive theme of Brontë's fiction, as Maynard sees it, is sexual awakening, a theme that in some respects has much in common with the discovery of the self that is emphasized by Moglen and Peters. But Maynard sees this self as so highly sexualized that the "awakening" and the "discovery" become hard to distinguish. His rich reading of the four mature novels builds upon while transcending almost all the earlier accounts described above, another way of saying that his "sexual" approach is neither constricting nor monomaniacal. (One wishes it were possible to praise his writing as well, which ranges from lamely inept in the opening three general chapters to relatively effective in the forceful chapters on the novels. And copy-editing is nowhere in evidence.)

Maynard's Rochester, far from being Exploitive Patriarchal Society, is an embodiment of male sexual needs—a precursor of Lawrence's Mellors—that counterpoints similar needs in Jane. "Like Lawrence . . . Brontë looks for an Adam of mature passion. Rochester is clearly associated with this resuscitated Adam and as clearly contrasted to the distorted, civilized St John." (p. 114) Bertha, instead of being Jane's double, represents for Maynard "the dangers of madly uncontrolled sexual feelings." (p. 126) Nor are Rochester and Bertha used by Brontë to express her own rage against men: "Brontë herself seems . . . a bad candidate for an extreme hidden anger against males: like Jane, she could accept men

[11] John Maynard, *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 171.

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she liked with warmth and she could be clear and direct in her criticisms of men who were bullying or authoritarian." (p. 250) For all her worship of Thackeray, one could add, she had very little trouble telling him off when he incensed her.

Maynard's tour of the novels reaches its high point in his impassioned account of the richness of *Villette*. Horrified at one critic's claim that Lucy Snowe "rid herself of her libido in making love to Dr. John's letters" so she could "pursue her real nature as a frigid woman" (p. 254), Maynard shows us how the novel allows M. Paul and Lucy to express their complex love "in a chapter that celebrates a kind of marriage":

> M. Paul takes Lucy into a small house. There is, pointedly, no servant, nobody but themselves—something not generally allowed in Victorian fiction. . . . The house recalls some of the idyllic places of love of the early tales. It is filled with plants and flowers. French windows are "kissed" by green leaves of climbing vines and open onto gardens and fields. Upstairs Lucy even has a bold look at "two pretty cabinets of sleeping rooms". . . . The emphasis is on loving and giving, not seduction and lust. But the scene and place nonetheless provide the magic of an initiation into a mature relationship for the two lovers. (p. 208)

Maynard's Brontë, in sum, is neither a neurotic nor a twentieth-century feminist, but a pioneer of expressive sexuality whom one could easily be induced to regard as pretty healthy. But nowadays, when it has become politic to see everything as just politics, perhaps proclamations of neurosis or health will be seen as one more political act. Why not say, then, that for Maynard, Brontë comes off looking better than most. Whom shall we offer as a paragon if *she* is merely a basket case: Yeats, Eliot, Hemingway, Pound?

As an important bonus, Maynard provides as addendum a new version of his earlier essay on the possible causes of Charlotte Brontë's death. Although Mrs. Gaskell had treated the marriage and death very briefly, she did convey implications of a pregnancy, but her very terse description of the death also suggests a debilitating weakness and delirium, possibly stemming from a bad cold that Charlotte had contracted somewhat earlier. The Brontë family doctor ascribed the death to "phthisis," which Maynard characterizes as "a general term for a tubercular wasting disease." In 1920, Lucile

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Dooley in "Psychoanalysis of Charlotte Brontë, as a Type of the Woman of Genius" attributed her death "to neurosis over marriage and motherhood," according to Maynard. This was the beginning of a strain of psychosomatic explanations that was later on encouraged by Dr. Phillip Rhodes, an M.D., who explained her death as hyperemesis gravidarum, a kind of severe morning sickness and vomiting that can lead to death in very neurotic women.[12] Rhodes also spoke of "unconscious rejection of the baby" and "failure to achieve satisfactory psychological relationships with most others." Parts of this explanation have been accepted by Peters, Moglen and others and we have already noted above how Moglen's use of this material characterizes the preposterous quality of much psychoanalytic post-mortem. Maynard remarks that "because this view of Brontë as a crippled neurotic has often been used to support a view of her work as artistically naive (written by her neurosis) and intellectually limited (written from compulsion, not understanding) the issue of Brontë's death even bears upon one's ultimate assessment of the nature and importance of her work." (pp. 218-19) And for variety's sake, it's worth mentioning here the view of Rosamond Langbridge, in her wild 1929 *Charlotte Brontë*[13] that Charlotte's death was the final consequence of her obnoxious husband's habit of reinforcing his wife's innate dutifulness—here the duty to be a mother!

Maynard, with the assistance of Dr. Gerson Weiss of New York University Medical Center, reviews these various hypotheses of Charlotte's death. Examining every known reference to Charlotte's health near the time of her death, they reach their own conclusions:

> Perhaps the most important point that emerges is how little can be surely known about the causes of Brontë's death. Dr Weiss's reasoning calls into strong question even the assumption that she was pregnant. His conclusions about her illness lend most weight to the traditional view that she died of some kind of rampant

[12] Cited by Maynard, p. 218: Phillip Rhodes, "A Medical Appraisal of the Brontës," *Brontë Society Transactions*, 16, no. 2, 1972, pp. 101-109.

[13] Rosamond Langbridge, *Charlotte Brontë: A Psychological Study* (New York, 1972). Wild as this particular example may be, Langbridge's book is also filled with some brilliant insights.

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> wasting disease such as the tubercular disease given in the original death certificate. What seems clear is that there is no ground for using the facts of her death to establish a psychological illness. It should be noted indeed that Brontë's mental health seems good in the records we have of her life before and after her marriage. She may not have found marriage at thirty-eight easy or Nicholls the ideal or romantic ideal of a husband. But she enjoyed her honeymoon trip to Ireland, took to her new life with energy, and testified to her continued affection for her husband. Dr Rhodes's account is not a careful look at the evidence concerning Brontë's death but another attempt to read her life (and her sisters' lives) according to a pattern of neurosis. . . . The evidence and reasoning about the evidence presented here . . . provides no support for the view that she was neurotic. Far less can we justify romantic notions that her death was caused by her psychological revulsion from motherhood or marriage, whatever we may think of the suitability of a woman of genius for either role in the nineteenth century. (p. 224)

Although the fiercest literary politicians insist that nothing is apolitical and that what *looks* apolitical is always only naturalized establishment politics, this position exists mostly to flatter their own immoderacies, which are themselves just attempts at violent naturalization. Everything is a rape anyhow, they appear to be saying, so when I violate you, just lie back and enjoy it. But when we review the positions taken in these various books about Charlotte Brontë, her life as well as her death, we must reject such facile blurring of distinctions. Moglen, Eagleton, Gilbert and Gubar, at their most ruthlessly polemical, attempt to force mouthfuls of bristling hay down the throats of their resisting readers. Eagleton's Marxism comes so close to entr'act buffoonery that it is easily separable from his valuable contributions, though it is harder to make this separation with some of the other writers. But even though Mrs. Gaskell and, to a lesser extent, Winifred Gérin, exhibit some religious tendentiousness with which we may not sympathize, we don't feel exploited and abused. Unlike postmodern writers, Mrs. Gaskell had very few philosophic options. When Eagleton, Gilbert and Gubar sit down to compose, it is with a consciousness of the whole overturned philosophic tradition, going back to Plato through Nietzsche, Derrida, Foucault and Richard Rorty. In place of Reason with a capital "R," there are now "reasons" and "paradigms." Real-

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ity is now seen not as the will of God but as Language, Metaphor, Textuality, Socialization. In the atmosphere of today's antifoundationalism, which calls into question epistemology and distrusts all accounts of the relationship between thought and "reality," taking aggressive proselytizing positions is no longer a matter of naiveté, innocence, or conformity with a divine will, but a calculating political action. The difference between Mrs. Gaskell and Mrs. Gilbert is little short of epochal.

Maynard, despite his prevailing theme of sexuality, seems the least programmatic and as a result he is uncommonly persuasive. On the subject of Charlotte's death his conclusions are the coolest and most plausible of any. Even Peters, who looks at Brontë's life from a feminist point of view, does not appear to be twisting our arms or manipulating our guilt. Thus, a distinction keeps begging to be made—between what is indeed merely and unabashedly political and what are the unavoidable limitations of individual existence in the world; between the conscious and voluntary choices of our day-to-day behavior (such as writing a certain type of book about Charlotte Brontë) and the unrecognized finitudes of society and personality that provide us all with ineluctable predilections and tics. Since being completely disinterested is tantamount to being dead, we all must act from some motivation or other. But to call all motivation and action political because they stem from human interests is like calling all behavior selfish because it satisfies human needs. Within the spectrum of human behavior there is a range from selfish to unselfish, from political to unpolitical, and most people can discern a difference. This difference does not depend on disinterest—because there *is* no disinterest—but it does depend on a particular kind of interest. To pretend that no difference exists is not only disingenuous but the most manipulative politics of them all.

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PETER J. SMITH

# Life of Beethoven

My mother says she has to have something sweet; does anyone have anything like that? They say to carry around with you some kind of sweet thing at all times but she's left her purse on the kitchen counter underneath the onions that are growing out like cactuses and besides, chocolate makes you fat. She's just three months out of her second rehab and they told her there sweets fool your body into thinking it's high.

"All I have is a Fresca," my sister Evie calls over. "It's in my orange bag. In one of the side pockets."

"No, no," says my mother. "Fresca has no sugar. That's Fresca's big deal, the point of Fresca. There's an entire cheesecake at the house. I'll wait for the cheesecake." Ten feet away I can hear her sigh.

The orange and green ball whizzes over the net and Evie hits it back cross-court. My father is beating her four games to three in the third set. Evie won the match two-nothing but they decided to play another set because it's still light out and neither of them is tired. Evie is serving. Her form is good but not all that interesting: the way she throws the ball up high, bringing her right arm down hard on it or, if the ball starts hooking to one side, catching it in her square palm and going through the sequence again. Even though summer's just started she's all brown, especially her knees, though the scabs from a hundred old falls make the skin there look lighter in places, glassed over.

"About that weird girl," my mother calls to Evie. "If there are two people in the world who look just alike, same fingerprints and same handwriting it's probably a law somewhere that they have to live on opposite sides of the country. And one or the other of you shouldn't be on this island, probably her. Your ancestors were here before practically anybody's. Anyway she's lucky to look like you."

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She's talking about a girl Evie saw this morning in town. Evie was buying cherries at the Korean grocery and while she was stuffing them into a baggie she noticed a girl standing at the salad bar who looked exactly like her, even from behind. The girl had baby corn in her tongs and she was taking her time and everyone in line behind her was getting impatient. Evie said she was staring so hard at this lookalike girl that she ate some cherries and the daughter of the Korean owners made her pay forty cents. When Evie came back to the house she announced to all of us that she was completely freaked. She started talking about there being so many people in the world these days there would have to be duplicates and she had just met hers, a slow girl at the salad bar. The worst part, she said, was that everything about the girl annoyed her.

My mother's sitting on top of an old dark green referee's chair on one side of the court. She's wearing a white scarf with strawberries on it. I've only seen friends of the players sitting in that chair, boyfriends, girlfriends, children. Dick Lyman, who referees the big summer's end tournament during the last week in August, says the chair frightens him. He likes sitting on the grass bank about five feet in back of the chair, yellow legal pad bit to a flat mud-colored wood board, where Margot is sitting now, holding her baby in such a way that she can also see the face of her watch. Her free hand is tightening, then loosening the big screws on Evie's racket press. Margot's wearing my old Deerfield jacket, blackly green with an astonishingly white zipper, even though the jacket's five years old. As the baby's fingers play down the zipper track the pull trickles along behind them.

"I send you to all those fancy tennis camps up in New Hampshire," my father calls across the net, "and you reward me by running me around, wearing me down. I'm an old man." He's wearing white shorts pulled up too high on his waist and a light blue shirt that says Fat Cat across it in big letters. The clasp on his shorts is rusted so the pockets are stained a cinnamon color. He bounces the green and orange balls a couple of times. They're from a new can so they bounce back up over his wrist. The balls are odd-looking, a clasp of vivid orange, one of lime green, like an illustration of two unfriendly races shaking hands, forgetting insults and a

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war. My mother says the balls look like they fell from space; whenever she can she gives them to the dogs.

The beach is quiet except for a few waves washing ashore. The tennis court is set about sixty feet from the edge of the water, in a clearing surrounded by trees. In back of it is the yellow clubhouse with its wraparound porch and cork bulletin boards and water fountain, and behind the clubhouse is the first hole of a nine-hole golf course. All the trees, during the day kept apart by gravel, narrow paths, low thorny bushes, start becoming one forest as the sky gets dark. It might be seven in the morning, not seven-thirty at night, because of the silence of those trees standing around, unsure what to do with the sudden weight of leaves. All day long there was no rain but the possibility of getting wet kept everyone inside. The sky cleared at about four, which was just around the time Margot drove in from the town in Connecticut where she's been living for three years, unbuckled the baby from the white seat-pouch and came into the house, carrying the baby and dragging behind her a blue overnight bag with a red strap and shallow pockets on the sides. None of us knew that bag, none of us were around when she must have bought it, and everybody gathered around her awkwardly. The new bag seemed indicative of something larger but no one could say what it was so everyone just kept commenting on its shiny unfamiliarity, its heroic colors, the number of pockets. It got stupid after a while—there's not all that much you can say about an overnight bag.

My mother has spent the morning opening up the high wood cabinets in the kitchen, not in search of anything specific but just to see if certain things—pots, spatulas, wire whisks, the silver wrapped in soft brown cloth—are where she remembers she left them. She keeps saying there's so much to do, that we're inside a whole new season. This time we made the switch from spring to summer without her. The first thing she did when she got out of the rehab was throw all the rugs down the porch stairs and then open all the windows on all three floors saying the place smelled sweet and dirty, like a children's museum. Before lunch she started cutting up dark green mint leaves for iced tea. The mint is the same color as

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the tarps that encircle the tennis court, dark as the referee's chair where my mother is sitting, dark as the ancient backboard over whose top seven orange and green balls have flown in the past half hour, mostly by my father's misfiring, the ball striking a hard part of the aluminum and arcing up over the fence, landing in the white, bud-blackened sand. Eight days ago one of Evie's wilder first serves flew into the Seldes' chicken cage in back of the clubhouse. I think it killed something.

My father says he can remember a time when tennis balls were white and Evie says she can too, but her voice has a dumb drift. This was in the seventies, before some kind of revolution in tennis took place. He guesses, my father does, that white got too plain for people, too boring or else too effete. Now and again you see an old white one that a dog has buried behind a shed for fifteen years, and you touch it, and maybe hold it, and it looks so foreign you want to throw it away.

A few feet offshore a shelf of dark rocks bends out far into the water. During high tides you wouldn't know the rocks were even there. You can only see their sharp blue tops sticking out of the water. The last time Margot was here the baby cut herself on one and wouldn't stop crying and Margot gunned the red Fiat and the baby to the emergency medical van in the parking lot in back of Sims' Deli. Going out the driveway Margot nearly hit some Finnish twins visiting next door for the summer. I waited in the car while the baby was getting taped up and in the end, not even the end but that night, the baby turned out to be just fine. It was the only time I've seen Margot get hysterical over someone else, and it was the first reaction I'd seen coming from the baby, who's normally a kind of stone child.

As the sky darkens so does the court. When my father plays here it's usually doubles, with a group of roving out-of-shape men with grey hair and flat blue sneakers, men who work in the city but who come out here every Friday night, like Mike Giles, who's a literary agent, and Roger Holmstead, who owns the Lemon Tree restaurant near Lincoln Center and a new popular one called the Centaur which just opened on West Broadway opposite an antique toy shop. In the ab-

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sence of quickness and power my father and his friends put a spin on practically every shot. This is how my father plays Evie. She can hit most of them back but sometimes she gets completely disoriented. Twice her racket slips from her hand onto the court. Evie thinks spins, the sick spin mentality she calls it, are dishonest, not aboveboard. She doesn't see how they're necessary for some people.

Evie's wearing a cap that's white with a beak-like purple visor. The brim says Scottie's Diner and the back of the cap says I Ate At Scottie's and the top of the cap facing the sky says At Scottie's We Make Friends Not Money so you can read the cap from all directions. There's a maple tree above her head, whose trunk begins on the other side of the railing and whose big soft leaves hang down and push through some of the holes. Every time Evie's driven back by one of my father's topspin forehands—this is when he's not dropping the little sickly ones up close—my sister brings her racket back and when she does she usually takes down a clump of leaves with her, flubbing the shot. The backcourt on her side is covered with leaves of all sizes while my father's side is bare except for needles and ants and the outline of a puddle that the players before us swept out. Evie's killing the tree and losing the set and she kicks the leaves angrily over to one side of the court.

Then she wins the next two points. "Bravo, Darling," my mother claps. "That's a Martina Chrissie shot."

My older sister gets up and starts wandering around with the baby. The baby's small dark feet are dangling down and they rock against Margot's belt. Margot is barefoot too even though there are pieces of glass mixed up with the pine needles and sticks and bottle caps buried in the sand. Her blue flip flops sit in the sand where she kicked them off earlier before going in swimming. When she unzipped her jacket to show a dark red single-piece bathing suit underneath Evie looked at her in disgust. "Jesus, doesn't she even bother to shave under her arms anymore? Where does she think she is? Italy?"

We stared rapt at those two plugs of dark hair as Margot strode into the water, foam spilling over her ankles. The baby sat on my mother's lap and tried to stand up. Margot swam

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out with a humorless stroke. "Oh, it's so nice to have a baby on my lap again after all this time," my mother said. "You all had to grow up." Then she called after Margot, "Thank you, Margot," but Margot kept swimming, her ears blocked with water, past the float, the protruding blue rocks, past the first flushed buoy. Babyless, free, she swam quickly and strongly, her arms rising and falling in front of her. It was good seeing Margot swimming alone again in her no-nonsense way. When she has the baby with her she walks like a restricted woman, tight, a skinny tree hugging unripe, heavy fruit. Margot reached a white boat anchored a hundred feet offshore and clutched the rudder with one arm, her legs kicking out underwater, stroking pockets of black air to the surface.

The baby's father is a builder named Tonio Pareles. Margot met him when Tonio's company was installing some spice shelves for her kitchen. I try sometimes to imagine how it all must have happened but all I can think of is the traditional workman/single woman-alone-during-the-day story: the house is hot (in July), the walls seem whiter than usual, Margot offers him one of those Swinkles beers she bought two cases of on special, she probably looks winded and I know she gets bold when she's tired, but I'm sure what happened is better than that. Tonio is from Medellín, with a long quick handsome face, and the two of them lived together for about a year before my sister had Maria. Four months after Maria was born Tonio got into his dark yellow GTO with the plates that said "Toros" and in his soft voice said he was going into Hartford to pick up a special coaxial cable for the VCR and that was the last anyone heard of him. My father said he knew all along something like this would happen, the question was when: *cuando*.

This was eight months ago, during the NFL strike. The players wanted a larger take of the stadium receipts and they got what they wanted the same afternoon my sister called to tell us Tonio had left. Since then she's started coming home on weekends more. There was a period in the middle when we didn't see her at all, just photographs she'd send of herself and the baby. Someone had to have taken these pictures, most likely Tonio, this is why my father handled them with such distaste, passing them on practically as soon as he was

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shown them. When Margot's at home she sleeps in a room on the top floor of the house, overlooking the country club she despises, that used to be hers but which has been turned into a combination sewing room and office.

Margot's first few weekends home after Tonio left were disastrous, marked by wounding arguments about Tonio's character, or lack of one, followed by long, suffering silences. The baby didn't cry once, she just stared at her wrists, blinking. My father claimed, among other things, that Tonio's charm had always seemed unreal, that he fit the psychological profile of the professional con-man Evie had xeroxed from the Sunday *Times*, that he was probably in trouble over drugs or an unpaid loan, that he was mercurial, slick, violent, malign and probably a manic-depressive. Now I wonder what if Tonio swings into her driveway one day, and Margot takes him back for reasons of her own, will she forget the things we said?

Far off on the mown green fields people are playing golf, or riding the carts back into the shed. Evie says, "Wait a minute," to my father and replaces her Scottie's Diner cap with a white cotton headband which she slips over her head to right below where her hair starts. For some reason it reminds me of something an old Hollywood actress would wear on a Sunday.

"Very chichi," my mother tells her. "That looks sensational with your coloring, Ev. I wish I could get away with that."

"Does anyone else want to play?" Evie holds the head of her racket with two hands, the grip pointing down toward the clay. She looks at me. "Do you want to play? Margot, do you want to play?" She pronounces the hard "g" so it sounds like an expletive, something in German. Margot, leaning over the water fountain thirty feet away, can't possibly hear her. "Mother?"

My mother tells her it's getting awfully dark out. "I'm happy here just watching you all. I love watching but not really playing it. The really good men on TV are what I really like watching. Connors, Lendl, Borg. Borg is the one I really have a thing for."

"Borg doesn't even play anymore," Evie says. "Borg took the money and ran."

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"I don't blame him," my father says. "Here, someone take my place. We're hogging the court. Oink, oink. I can't say I blame the guy."

"He does too still play."

"Mother, he does not. Where've you been? Borg retired about a million years ago."

"Well, I don't know that. Not paying close attention quite obviously. You tell me where I've been. Where have you all been? Maybe it was a video of him I saw but it was recent."

Evie shakes her head, says nothing.

"I love Borg's concentration. The way he lets no muscles move around in his neck or his face while he's waiting. To receive the ball. He doesn't let anything on. He refuses to let himself get bothered by little gnatty ideas or people."

"You do?" my father says.

"He quit," Evie says before my mother can answer. "Borg is out. Through. Over with. He married some woman, some Hungarian woman. She plays too. I don't think they're even married anymore."

"Well, then he's eligible again, Evie."

"So?"

"Well, consider it. I think it would be sensational having Borg around here. Give us all lessons. Be a good example to us."

"Oh, sure," Evie says. "I'm really going to marry a man whose neck and face muscles never move. What fun for me. A man who never reacts to anything. Meaning me. Great marriage, mother, very promising. I can't wait." She starts bouncing a ball with the heel of her racket.

"No, I can't say I blame the guy," my father says. "Taking all his loot out the country through a back door and sitting back earning the interest."

"Daddy, I have a question," Evie says. "Can you blame the guy? There seems to be a lot of controversy over how you feel about this."

"Some people think Borg played in a truly boring way," I say, as my mother starts to get down off the referee's chair. My father holds out his hand and she takes it and steps onto the grass. "All that showing of nothing at all."

"Oh, I disagree," my mother says. "I think that's the way

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you play if you want to win things. All the really good players have it. Martina has it for the women. That's the way you ensure nothing will get in your way. Nothing will bug you."

The first shadows, blue, encroaching blocks, start showing up on the court, or maybe it's that I'm seeing them for the first time. They push toward the serving line on Evie's side and make the olive clay look damp and ragged.

My father and Evie start playing again since no one else seems to want to. "Five-three, my ad, right?" my father says. He wins three points in a row off his slow, looping serve. "Forty nada," he calls. "Look out, your old dad's on a tear."

"That headband isn't lucky for you, Ev," my mother tells her. "It's just not," she says to me. "Ever since she put it on she hasn't hit a good one."

"It's these goddamn mosquitos everywhere," Evie says. Five feet above her a tangle of mosquitos hangs down in the blue soaking air. She slashes at the tangle with her racket but the pitfalls are so obvious you can almost see the bugs pass right through the gut and out the other side. For a while she looks like a crazy person trying to hit a ball that isn't there.

"They like you, Darling," my mother says helpfully.

"They're chasing me too," my father says, "but it's still five-three. You don't hear me making excuses like the court's too long or there are bugs crawling down my neck or the net's too close to the ground."

"The net is a little high," my mother says. "Evie was right when she said that. That's not the net height I remember when I used to watch *my* father playing. Did any of you know my father built his own tennis court? Just him and one other man?"

She looks at each of us.

"Well, *I* knew that," my father says. "What do I get for knowing that?"

Evie sighs loudly. My father takes the opportunity to go behind the fence to retrieve a ball he's hit out. No one says anything for a minute and then Evie says in a bored voice, "Where?"

"Where what?" My mother's voice is light and breathless as though "Where, what?" is the first time she's used her throat all day. Her scarf is blowing. My father tosses the ball high

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over the fence and it hits the clay and bounces up dumbly, again and again.

"Where did you watch your father?"

"In New Mexico. In Taos. Daddy built his own court and the dirt was like pennies because that's the color there. The only problem was you couldn't control how the balls would bounce. When it rained the rocks were exposed. You would have needed a giant colander to rid yourself of all those baby rocks."

"We're trying to play one last point here," my father calls out. "Then we'll chatter it up like crazy afterwards. After the point."

"I'm sorry." My mother walks over to the bank of green grass and sits down heavily. She looks as though someone has pushed her. "I didn't mean to spoil your concentrations. Most people can play and talk at the same time without getting all—" She hesitates "—all squirrely about it."

"Borg couldn't," Evie says, awaiting my father's second serve.

"Bjorn Borg can do anything in my opinion just about. Except I don't think he would like either you or your father very much." She gets up and comes over to where I'm sitting. "Hello," she says to me. Margot is walking in the direction of the water, which looks grey and very wet. "Don't you love babies?" my mother says to me. "Aren't babies soft, sensational things?"

The baby is lying on the grass where Margot left her, on her stomach, rocking slightly. I can't tell if the wind is rocking her, or if the baby is rocking herself. Whatever the case, it's making my stomach feel very light, as though there's a ring of leaves blowing around in there.

"I think something's definitely off with this baby," I say. "It doesn't move much. It just stares straight ahead." I fan the air in front of the baby's face but she just licks her lips.

"We should call her Bjorn," says my mother, pleased by the baby's lack of expression. "Look at her mouth." She traces it with her thumb. "Tonio had a beautiful mouth too. It's a Latin thing, good mouths."

I tell her Maria's a girl but she says, "Bjorn could be a girl's name. There's not a rule. I had a beautiful young cousin

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named Steve when I was growing up, a girl. Long blond hair, almost white hair. She married a man named Paul Castle who used to have something to do with Quaker Oats. So it was Steve and Paul on the wedding invitation and they're still together which is quite an accomplishment these days."

She says this in a way that suggests a man's name on a beautiful girl can keep a marriage exhilarating. My father and my sister, their set finished, their rackets zipped up in white rubber cases, are walking toward us. Margot is standing on the shore, her head tipped to one side, her damp brown hair blowing slightly. At that moment she is as mysterious to me as a member of your family can be. Then she starts walking back, taking long, careful steps. When she reaches us she picks up the baby and holds her high. "Were they nice to you?" she croons. "Were they nice at all? Or were they mean and rotten to you?"

"Mean and rotten," Evie says. "Do you remember that record we all had once? When we were children? The life of Beethoven? Narrated by Zoe Caldwell or someone like that? And the mother comes in and she says, Ludwig? Ludwig? And then you hear chords crashing and Zoe Caldwell goes: It was then she realized Ludwig van Beethoven was deaf. Stone deaf." She repeats these last words for emphasis.

"What makes you think of that?" my father says.

"Maria's not deaf if that's what you're implying," Margot says. "And I don't even think that's all that funny."

"Deaf, stone deaf," Evie says pleasantly. "Don't be such a haughty bitch."

"You're getting her wet, Margot," my mother says. "Maria hates that, I bet. Babies are just like cats about water."

Just then I see two small yellow lights blinking through the dense trees that line the road down to the beach and at first, because they disappear, I think they must be fireflies. Then they reappear and in a minute a car pulls into the white sand parking lot. A white-haired man in a navy blue jacket gets out and goes around to open the other door and a smiling girl of about seventeen wearing a white dress gets out and smooths her hair. She takes his arm and they walk toward the clubhouse.

"Father daughter?" I can hear my father say softly. "Letch

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and ingenue? What do you think the dynamics of that relationship are?"

"What do you suppose is happening?" my mother says in a worried voice. She stares at the couple as they disappear behind the tarpaulin. All that's visible now is from the knee down, the man's blue pressed trousers, shined shoes, the hem of the woman's white dress, her heels clicking against the wood walk. "Is today a holiday?"

"Letch and ingenue," Evie says. "Knowing all the alkie letches who live in these parts. The gin and topsiders gang. Or maybe's she's his niece."

"Isn't there a holiday around this time? Patriots or Memorial?" She looks at Margot for help. "I have no sense of time whatsoever."

"Is that like time immemorial?" Evie says. She turns to my father. "Those two are definitely not related."

Margot shakes her head and smiles mysteriously. The baby's arms are spread as if she wants to dive. Another car winds down into the parking lot and pulls up beside the first car. Six people clamor out. Evie laughs suddenly. My mother says to my father, "We're members here still, aren't we? It's not just that we live up the road is it?"

"Sure we're members," my father says. "If you saw how much I paid these people for that dubious privilege you'd know we were members."

"Maybe I'll ask one of them."

"What, if we're members here? I told you."

"Just what's going on. I don't remember hearing about any sorts of things going on tonight. Wouldn't anybody who's a member have been informed? It's Friday, isn't it?" She starts toward the clubhouse.

"Don't," Margot says in a troubled voice. The baby smacks her lips. Margot waves her hand. "Why is it remotely important?"

My mother glares at her. "I like to know what's going on, Margot. If it's all right."

Two men drive up in a cart with a strawberry-colored golf bag resting in the back seat. The man at the wheel is one of the heads of the beach association. My mother knows him and she goes over to the cart. My father lets the head of his

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racket fall to his side and air escapes through his teeth. Margot is swinging the baby around and making buzzing sounds. The baby's mouth is wide open; she looks awed. In a moment my mother comes back and says, "It's all fine."

She starts walking toward the car. My father calls after her, "What, what is it that's so fine all of a sudden?"

She turns back to him. She looks happy, energized and confused. "Oh, Spence, it's a golfing dance or some ridiculous thing with a sea-captain theme. It's all golfing people. Nothing could be less interesting to anybody who has a bubble of sanity in his head." She shakes her head as though she's going to say something more but she doesn't. We follow her to the car.

We sit on the porch later that evening drinking iced tea with blades of mint at the bottom. It's a hot night; at eight-thirty the temperature is seventy-five degrees. Up and down the road you can hear the electricity humming in the long, limp wires. The porch smells of flowers and mildew, lemon oil from the table where the iced tea pitcher is resting.

Margot is upstairs putting the baby to sleep. Evie, who begins summer school in two weeks, is sitting on the couch reading a book about a mass murderer in the northwest, the Bellingham area. Every now and then she lays the book down and tells us something the man did that was particularly appalling. "People worked next to this guy." She sounds incredulous. "Women did I mean, and they didn't suspect. They had no idea. His supervisor even baked him oatmeal raisin cookies. She felt sorry for him because he told her he was all by himself on his birthday."

"I can certainly see why," my mother says. "He was by himself that is. If he was a murderer."

"What's the name of the guy?" says my father.

"Randall. Randall and I can't pronounce his last name."

My mother says she used to have a beau named Randall but that was his last name, not his first. He was the only heir to a Midwestern textile fiber fortune and he died of lupus. She pours Evie another glass of iced tea and Evie says *merci* in a bad French accent. She doesn't glance up once from her

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book but at a certain point she tells my mother to stop pouring. She's still pretty mad and in acknowledgment of this my mother's footsteps are lighter than usual, as though there's a glass in the room. On the trip back to the house from the beach we passed by the Gordons' house, set back at the end of a long gravel driveway. There was a low red sign next to the mailbox that said, Please—No Turns. It had been put up recently since there was a shovel nearby. When Evie saw the sign she made a noise that sounded like laughing. "The only reason the Gordons bought that sign is that they're tired of seeing cars nosing into their driveway and getting their hopes raised that they actually have a friend or two."

This was not only untrue; it was unfair. The poor Gordons had no more and no fewer friends than anyone on the road, more probably since Mr. Gordon is a former director of Amnesty International and holds meetings in his garage once a month. My mother turned around sharply. "Arlene Gordon has been a terrific friend," she said. "Simply terrific. Supportive and all the rest. She stuck by me. You judge your friends by who sticks by you, Evie, by who lasts when you last. Don't you always be so mean about everybody. I'm sick of your cutting, destructive sense of humor." We rode back to the house in silence. Later, over dinner, my mother apologized and said my sister was probably right.

After a while Evie shuts her book and announces she's going running.

"Isn't it too hot and dark out?" my mother says. "Won't you collapse?"

Evie ignores her. As she's going past the electric bug killer, a fat purple tube of light curled inside a cage, it crackles once. "Bam," my father says without looking up. "Evie, want to check out what we got?"

"How does everyone think Margot is?" my mother says.

"Why doesn't everyone ask her?" Evie says.

"Fine," my father says.

"Evie, how do you think she looks?"

Evie, who's at the door, says, "Fine," in a voice not all that different from my father's.

"Except I get worried that little baby's not getting enough attention."

"That baby's a zombie," Evie says.

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"Oh she is not," my mother says. "I love that little baby. I love seeing what babies look like. I used to think that was the only reason to have children, see what they looked like, see which detail of which parent they'd picked up. Then of course later there were overwhelming reasons."

"Well, thank God she doesn't look overly like the Mexican," my father says.

Evie looks at me, not knowing whether to laugh. My mother stares. "Why do you say things like that?"

"Why?" He shakes his head. "Why?"

My mother stands up. "I loved Tonio's looks. Say what you want, Tonio was a beautiful-looking male specimen. It's so rare people have sensational looks like that and Tonio certainly did. I just hope Maria's inherited some of the genes of his that control the eyelashes. Tonio had killer eyelashes." She crosses the room and stands in front of the bug zapper for a minute. She follows the grey cord with her eyes. "I won't ask a soul how he or she thinks I look," she says carefully.

"Oh cut the shit, Mother," Evie says. "You look fine too. Everybody in the world looks fine."

In the morning Margot is already up when I go into the kitchen. She is sitting at the table drinking some kind of dark brown tea and her long hair is wet and twisted. She looks surprised that someone else is awake so early.

I ask how she slept. "Terrible. I woke up at about three in the morning, maybe you heard me. I guess it rained. There was a mist outdoors. You couldn't see yourself almost. I went for a walk—"

"You went for a walk in the middle of the night?"

She nods. "When I came back I fell across my own car. It was that hard to see. I tripped. I fell into the windshield and crashed my arm."

Margot holds up her elbow. I tell her it looks fine, which it does.

"I know," she says. "That's because I've quit bruising."

A terrible smell is coming from the stove, the near burner. It smells like the beach when the tide gets low. "What do you mean?"

"This program I'm involved with."

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"What program?"

"It's what I teach my women at the center. Except it's adjusted to me in particular. It's a control type of thing. You take control of every aspect of your life, your body, what you eat. How you run your stuff. It's a mixture of vitamins and lots of exercise and a formula you cook up. I mean exercise until you want to scream. I call it the system."

"The system," I repeat. "It sounds sort of sci-fi."

She doesn't laugh. "It thickens your blood, the formula. You take it three times a day. So if you fall down or trip or something it doesn't affect you at all. I've reached a point now where I could fall down a hundred flights of stairs and then get up, walk around, you know, lecture on it all. Look." She swings her legs out from underneath the table. All up and down her legs the skin is smooth and dark, like wood that's been sanded.

She shrugs her shoulders and puts her legs back under the table. I try and digest this. "Maybe it's all a coincidence," I suggest.

"What's a coincidence?"

"The fact you're so unmarked but then you're also on this whacked-out system. The system," I correct myself.

"Coincidences just don't happen to me anymore. They used to but they don't now. Not since I started on the system. And it's not whacked out as you say. In fact," she goes on, "I don't think I've said the words 'What a coincidence' about anything for a long time. Then you realize all the expression was was a way of making you think that somewhere there's a blueprint and coincidences are its human expression. So no. In answer to that no."

I don't understand what she's talking about so I get up to make some coffee and when I'm over at the stove I look down at Margot's concoction. It looks like she's boiling a combination of wood chips and algae. Margot sees me looking. "You boil that for twenty-five minutes and then you stick it all in a blender. Mush it up. You can try some if you want," she adds, shyly.

I go over to the porch door and stand there a minute, looking out at the empty lawn. The dogs are nosing the latch to the outer screen. Margot's old cranberry towel is spread out

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across the top three stairs, muddy golden retriever prints along one side. "No thanks," I finally say. I want to be polite but this does not look good, this system Margot has adopted. Briefly, I consider the idea that everyone in my family might be seriously crazy, or at least all the women. In a stab at normalcy I ask Margot if she wants to play tennis in a little while, before it gets too hot.

"Not particularly."

"Why?"

"It's silly. It's a silly game. Watching them play last night I got to feeling how completely fatuous a game it is. It made me think of this course I took on the Mayan Indians once. The Mayans just about invented games. They built these big dusty courts. They were just trying to pass a little time in the sun. Between moons. And for one split second watching Dad and Evie play I had this amazing clarity and I thought, why is this any different from a couple of Mayans wasting time in the jungle? Between moons? Pushing ugly balls back and forth. Trying to eat up time. It was all so completely pointless." She goes over to the stove and takes the pan off the heat. "Plus, I haven't played since I was in college and I'm terrible."

I let the dogs into the house and while I'm feeding them they swarm around me like a couple of fish. Margot is putting her boiled mixture into the blender and when it's mixed she pours it into a blue coffee cup. In a minute my mother comes into the kitchen. She's wearing a terry cloth bathrobe and slippers with elephant trunks coming out of the toe. "What's everybody doing up so early?"

Margot says, "Hard sleeping."

"You couldn't sleep? Why's that? Why couldn't you sleep? Let's analyze this. Why that is. Your not being able to sleep." She comes up behind Margot and puts her hands on the chair.

"Let's not analyze this," Margot says in a pleasant, distant voice. "It was hot, that's all."

"I'm so used to getting up with the bobwhites it's gotten to be a habit," my mother says. "At the facility for the first two weeks they woke me at three in the morning. Even Jane Pauley isn't up at three. Or she's up but she's groggy. They kept

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taking my blood pressure and oh, later on they forced me into meditation for a whole hour. This is before I've even had my first cup of coffee."

I picture my mother sitting meditating on a plaid blanket, her eyes trying to stay shut but coming apart every few minutes, checking to see if the other women have their eyes closed. Margot says, "Didn't that make you want to go right back to sleep?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact it did. I couldn't concentrate on the subject at hand, which was supposed to be me."

"I think they ought to have an hour of obsession," Margot says presently. "Not meditation, obsession. Every day. You can think about some jerk for an hour or two hours and then you realize you might as well be doing something else so you stop."

"Where's Maria?"

"She's sleeping."

"Is she all right?"

"Yeah, it's seven in the morning, that's why she's sleeping."

"Babies know no hours," my mother says. "That's why I'm asking."

"Well, that's why I'm telling you she's asleep."

"You look tired," my mother says. "Do you feel exhausted?"

"I'm in great shape."

"I know you are, Margot. I'm not, what's the word, challenging your good shape. I just sometimes think there's pressure on you, darling. You're in a situation that's created for two people but it's just you. Not that you're not wonderfully sufficient by yourself." She glances over at the chewing dogs, their ears blocking the bowl. "The dogs are all inside." She clears her throat. "Thank you someone for doing that. And coffee is all made. You know, I'm thinking of getting an espresso maker for this kitchen. One of those big gleaming coppery silver ones restaurants have. To make really sensational coffee for all of us every morning. I think we should have the best-tasting coffee. Or the best coffee machine that makes the best coffee that might not always be top top top. I don't think we're nice enough to ourselves."

She pours herself a half-cup of coffee, then she lights a cig-

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arette and opens the porch door and breathes the smoke out. When she turns back to us her eyes look robbed of light.

The day is long and motionless. The birds whistle but they sound fatigued and I keep having to refill the dogs' water bowls. At eleven in the morning my mother goes back up to her bedroom and turns on the air conditioner. "Not to keep you all out," she says before closing the door. "Just to keep this cool air in. Anyone can visit me if they feel like it." Evie goes running after lunch and when she comes back her eyes look drugged. Her skin is a dark pink color and when her heart beats her whole body seems to shift. She disappears into the basement and when she comes up twenty minutes later she's balancing the Beethoven record on her head.

"It's Julie McGiven," she says at the top of the basement stairs. "Reading. Not Zoe Caldwell." She puts the record on and that afternoon I learn more about the life of Beethoven than I ever knew before. I find out that he had no close friends and that he was distrustful of women. I learn that he was a shrewd businessman who died during a thunderstorm, clenching his fist. The album treats Beethoven like a roaring saint. We hear him practicing behind his bedroom door while his father gets drunk in the kitchen. All his brothers are played by one actor and they say things like, "Ludwig, don't be so flinty and bearish."

Evie sits on the couch reading the liner notes, her feet up, her dark pink skin draining back to normal. "Beethoven was born December fifteenth," she announces. "Capricorn. All the great people are Capricornianistishes. Me and Beethoven. That means I'm a genius too."

We listen to side one and most of side two. I'm amazed Evie was able to find this record, ten or so years after we last played it. When the mother discovers her son's deafness Evie's eyes widen. "Stone deaf!" she screams along with Mrs. Beethoven.

At around seven-thirty we drive the half-mile down to the beach in the station wagon. There's a dance at the clubhouse in honor of the start of the summer. Tonight's theme is freedom. Evie is dressed up as the Statue of Liberty as is my mother. Both of them are wearing lime-colored Styrofoam

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crowns that slip on over their heads like rabbit ears. My father is wearing a blue blazer over a T-shirt that has some kind of white flying bird on it. Margot doesn't come with us in the car. She says she'll be down as soon as the babysitter arrives. Before leaving the house my mother fixes herself a huge roast beef and tomato sandwich on pumpernickel which she eats noisily in the front seat. When she pats her mouth the napkin is stained with pink roast beef blood.

The clubhouse is lit up and crowded. Yellow bulbs hang loosely in the branches of the pine trees and along the white cottony top of the tennis net. Three black grills are set up on the porch. The tide is low which makes the rocks and the insides of the shells stink. A group of children, the girls in long gypsy dresses, the boys with long light hair, are walking along the shoreline, talking and laughing.

Margot makes her entrance after dinner, wearing a very tight black dress. Big white and yellow daisy earrings hang down from her ears. When she sees us she waves disinterestedly but the table where we're sitting is full so she finds an empty seat three tables away next to a muscular black-haired man with very pale skin. I guess he asks her to dance because after a while they get up and approach the center of the room.

Evie leans over to me. "I didn't know Margot was still in her foreigner phase. Where do you suppose this one's from?"

They start dancing, Margot and this strong man with pale skin. I've never seen a dance as peculiar as this one they're doing. The man is holding her tightly by the wrists. He ducks behind her and when Margot turns around to face him he turns his back to her. Then he grasps her by the wrists again and pumps them up and down. He looks like he's hurting her but Margot is smiling and then I remember my sister doesn't bruise anymore. That makes it all right.

Evie is really getting revved-up now. "What does that get-up she's wearing have to do with freedom? She looks like a mortician. She looks like she spends all her time scheduling double-funerals. She looks like she was born in Malta. She looks like Beethoven."

Across the table my father is talking to Mrs. Singer about the best way to remove a tick from a dog's neck. First you wet

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a cloth, or a couple of them, if you're squeamish. Then you grasp the tick, twist it counter-clockwise and dunk it in a kerosene solution. Someone has to keep the dog's head still or it'll twist around when the tick does. This image makes Mrs. Singer laugh uncontrollably. "Like the little girl in the exorcist movie. Do you remember her head went round and round?" Mrs. Singer is wearing red and blue sticky stars on her cheeks and forehead and one of them floats down onto the table. "Look," she says, pointing. "A little star swimming in my coffee."

All the while I'm staring out at the strong man who's pushing my sister around on the dance floor. My father starts talking about the time he went to Wimbleton as the guest of Prince Henry of Scotland and Prince Henry's girlfriend Serena, a distant relation of the Queen's. My mother listens, nodding but looking confused. She pushes back her soft spiky crown as though changing the angle will somehow help her understanding. "You never told me about that," she says to my father at one point.

"Didn't tell you what? You were with me. I tell you everything my love. What was it I neglected to tell you?"

All eyes go to my mother, who puts one hand on top of the other. "I remember," she says simply. "Now I do. You told me. I just wasn't thinking at all."

My father is in a jovial mood and now he addresses the whole table. "Henry was with this little girl Serena who was a dead ringer for the Queen. Same muskratty nose, same hair except you have to remember this girl was seventeen, eighteen. And the tennis that day was just extraordinary. Just—" He shakes his head. "Everything on that court was white. The clothes, the balls—"

"The players," someone says.

"I remember Big Billy Tilden," one woman says.

"Wasn't Tilden put in jail?" my mother says, trying to catch up. "Wasn't Tilden a fag?"

"I don't think he was ever put in jail physically," says Mrs. Singer.

"I think he was either a fag or at least he was some sort of inner fag," my mother says.

"Tilden was a great player," my father says. "You know, he

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was about as tall as my ceiling at home. Tilden had famous reflexes too. He would stand in his back yard catching flies in his bare palm in the summertime."

My mother smiles, shrugs softly and looks out onto the dance floor where Margot and the man are dancing a kind of modified Charleston. She touches my arm. "I think she's having fun. Margot. I'm so embarrassed," she says softly. "So embarrassed." She repeats these words lightly again and again. I ask her if she wants to dance.

She refuses. "That's very sweet of you but no. I feel worn down. Just worrying about Maria being babysat for by a strange girl." She laughs. "I don't think I'd be able to dance too well thinking of our house going up in flames."

While I'm talking to my mother it seems my father and Evie have challenged Mike Giles and his daughter Lois to a set of tennis. All four of them are standing, talking loudly, slightly drunk. I tell my mother that if the house were on fire she would be able to see the light from here, or smell it at least. I'm joking when I say this but she says, "No, I personally couldn't. I'm here at a table that faces the water. And tonight there's no wind. It's so muggy. Plus my nose is stuffed. There must be a cat around. I don't see how anybody can play tennis in this heat. I think they must all have had too much to drink. Oh, do me a favor and put this in Margot's purse before she leaves tomorrow." She goes through her purse and takes out a thick white envelope. "You'd have reason to be in her room but I just wouldn't anymore. It's something to help her out a little bit so she can go to a Broadway show now and then."

"I don't think they have Broadway shows where Margot is."

"Whatever," she says, closing her eyes briefly. "Movies. She can go to New York. I don't want to hear what that dull little town doesn't have in the way of keeping poor Margot occupied. If you'd do that for me, sneak that into a pocket or a purse. She can buy herself some up-to-date clothes. She can buy baby a little thing with it, a duck or a hat."

I sit with my mother for a while and in about fifteen minutes my father and Evie are back in their whites, carrying their rackets and about five cans of those exotic orange and green balls. If the house has burned down they are keeping

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the news to themselves. My father seems very excited; he keeps taking practice backhands with the freedom of someone who thinks he's alone and unwatched. As the air pours through the gut it makes a whoosh sound. We follow them out to the court as they start warming up. The overhead lights have been turned on and Mike takes the Christmas lights down off the net, wraps them up still burning and heaves them onto the referee's chair, next to a bottle of Moët et Chandon my father brought down for the winners.

Mike and Lois win the toss and Lois starts serving. "F.B.I.," she calls out. Lois is a tall, strong-shouldered girl who was once a member of a cult in the Berkshires and had to be forcibly deprogrammed, but that has nothing to do with her tennis, which is graceful and determined. A warm wind is blowing on the court so she has to underhit all her serves. My mother, sitting on the grass bank, smoking a cigarette that looks almost gymnastically white under the stars and the lights, her green crown sprawled forward, says to no one in particular, "I wish someone had brought my dark glasses down here. It's very hard to make out that ball."

At one point, with the Giles team ahead two-one, my sister is standing at the net with her racket raised. My father is serving to Lois. The serve is a good one and Lois lobs the ball high over Evie's head. "Switch," my father calls. Evie moves to the forehand side and when my father returns the favor, sending up a soft lob swollen with spin Mike Giles is right there at the net and he slams the ball straight into Evie's face.

My sister gives a little shriek. She drops her racket and presses both hands up to her eyes. My mother rushes over. "My lord," she keeps saying. "You all right, baby?" my father says. Both of them try and put their arms around her but Evie skips away, her hands still holding her face.

Mike Giles is shaking his head. "I didn't mean to hit her," he says to anyone who'll listen. Lois is nodding seriously, not wanting to abandon her father at this point. "I just wanted to make the good shot. I meant the damn thing to go lower. God I've watched this girl grow up, I wouldn't hit her on purpose."

A moth crosses one of the court lights, a dark pulpy shadow on the bright clay. Lois screams, "That's a bat, I swear to

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you that's a bat." Mike Giles says, "Only one crisis at a time, Lois, please," in a voice that hints that chaos isn't unfamiliar to either of them. I go over to where Lois is standing and tell her that it was just a big moth and not to panic. Then, with everybody else, I try and get Evie to take her hands away from her face but she won't. "I'm fine," she says through her fingers. "Just let me walk around a little."

Everyone is standing around the net, not knowing what to do next. Mike suggests we all drink the champagne and forget the set. He tells us a story about an author he represented in the fifties who got hit in the face with a squash racket and afterwards his left eye traveled slightly. "It made him very attractive to women for some reason. Not to suggest the same thing's going to happen here," he adds cheerfully. "It's different for a man than a woman. How's the eye doing now, sweetheart?"

My father suggests we play Canadian Doubles but Mike says that's no fun, plus the winner never feels he's won fairly. My mother suggests I take Evie's place but my father says with a smile that I'm too good for hackers like them. Mike says I can't be all that good if I live in a city. "You never get to play. What, you're telling me you be invading some kids' p.s. whatever a thousand playground, bang a fluorescent ball against the graffiti?"

"You want to come in?" my father says. I tell him sure, why not.

I borrow Evie's racket from her. Her hands are finally off her face and her right eye is crimson. The skin underneath her eye is blazing. My mother and she start walking toward the car and from the back, with her crown racked back, my mother looks just like she's supposed to: the Statue of Liberty offering refuge to a hurt, bloodshot refugee.

At this point all I know is that when I get onto the court I start taking shots that don't belong to me. Officially I'm in the forehand court but I find myself hitting just about everything. Not only do I hit the balls that come to me, and the ones down the middle that either of us could take, but also the ones meant clearly for my father. It happens that my aim that night is rare and ninety percent of what I hit goes in so there's really nothing anyone can say or do. Once my father

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says, "Hey, fella', give an old guy a chance," and I apologize but then I keep on doing what I've been doing. On the court I feel crazy, charged and extremely lucid.

"Jesus," Mike says after the fifth game, "this is supposed to be fun and games, right? You getting back at me for hitting your sister or something? You've made your point, friend." Two shots later I slam a ball past him and he can't even get his racket on it. He swipes at the air. He stares at me questioningly and at that instant, in the unflattering court light, he looks as though he's played sports for too many years. I remember Gordie Howe had that look—warned, surprised, tired—when for a short while he was skating beside his two young sons. Mike doesn't say another word to me for the rest of the set and I think Lois stopped talking to me after the fourth game when I hit her on the side of the neck. We beat them six games to one and as we're walking off the court my father tells the Gileses, "Here, go ahead, take the champagne. It's a gift from old spoilsport here, with my apologies here, Mike." He doesn't look at me.

I run home, still charged up for some reason. When I get there Evie is in the kitchen holding a cold white rag up to her eye. The faucet is on. From the living room I can hear Beethoven's life story being told again. "God, you should have been here," Evie says when she sees me. "You really missed out on a good one this time, boy."

"What happened?"

"Margot," she says, "and that man, Victor. She was here, rather both of them were sitting here when we got back. On the porch. They were drinking up all my Molsons that I bought for the party last week. They had the radio on and then, let's see, Mother went up to bed so we were left alone with this person. And that 'We Are the World' song came on over the radio and Victor just started freaking out. 'This is my song' he kept saying and he started claiming he had written the words and the music, that the whole thing of getting all those people to sing was his idea and that Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie, whoever supposedly wrote the thing, had plagiarized all his material and he had a lawsuit pending against all the parties concerned and when it comes to trial heads'll roll and Michael and Lionel will go to hell. Then he

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started listing off all these other songs he said he'd written but never seen any royalty money on, like the theme from 'Wagon Train' if you can remember the theme from 'Wagon Train.' What else, 'Bad Girls,' that Donna Summer song, all the Christmas carols people sing in December." Evie keeps shaking her head. It's obvious her eye feels much better. "Finally Margot convinced the guy to get out. First I tried by putting on the Beethoven record and then Margot mentioned she had a kid upstairs sleeping. That did it. Beethoven and the kid and the next thing you know the guy has an early appointment the next morning etcetera and needs sleep. I thought he was going to kill us all, frankly. He was so, so crazy. An excellent dancer but crazy. Crazies know Margot will like them and feel sorry for them so they come to her, it's like a pilgrimage. Loopy foreign men who take off at the sight and sound of kids. This guy was from the Middle East, Semen, I think, or Yemen. I think Margot's baby is going to go crazy when she gets old enough. I think Margot's probably sacked out of her mind too. But it's that baby that's going to be the truly insane one. Oh, speaking of crazy, speaking of Lois Giles, who won?"

The next morning when I get up I find Margot outside in the driveway loading cartons of books into the back seat of her car.

"I need these," she says when I ask her what she's doing. "A lot of times I say to someone I have such and such book, let me go get it for you, and I look and I can't find it. I have a mental picture of where it is and which books are on either side of it but then I realize I'm picturing books from the bookshelf in the wrong house, this one."

There are four boxes of books in the car, on top of her suitcase. I glance down at some of the titles, college texts mostly, with some children's books mixed in. Margot goes into the house and comes back out with Maria. The baby's already belted into her seat-pouch and she's staring ahead the way she usually does.

"May I ask you something?" I say as Margot's strapping the baby into the front seat. "Don't get offended but is that baby all right? That baby seems so gloomy all the time. The way she just gazes out at things."

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My sister backs up out of her car and manages a slight smile. "Yeah," she says. "She's all right. She's just a gloomy kid sometimes. So was Beethoven, what can I tell you. She's really quite varied when you're living with her. It's just in front of you guys she's like this. She'll grow out of it probably."

I kiss Margot goodbye. She's put some of her foul-smelling tea in a red thermos for the road. Even though the screw cap is on I can smell the low tide smell. I wonder if it reminds Margot of us. I know I won't see her for another eight months or so, maybe longer. In two weeks she's going to Africa to study herbal medicine and after that she plans to go to Italy for a while. The next time I see Maria she'll be a big brown staring girl, grown out of her gloom into a full-throttle depression.

"Well, bye," Margot says. "Say goodbye to everybody." By the time my parents wake up she's probably halfway to Connecticut. Over coffee my father, who three months later will collapse playing the game he loves and die before anybody can do anything for him, asks me why in the world I insulted Mike Giles, who's a good friend of his. "You just looked so . . . hostile out there," he says. "Very seriously. It was very unexpected and very well, chilling is the word that came to my mind this morning. You scared us all I think."

My mother comes downstairs and says immediately, "Where's Margot? Why didn't anybody wake me up when she left? Why is it that what people do and what I want them to do are always two different things? Where's Maria?"

I tell her the baby went along with Margot, of course. My mother says not of course, not to take such things for granted. She skits around the room, fattening the pillows. Once she heard of a seven-month-old baby that was left by its mother on a ferris wheel for two hours. The baby sat alone in the compartment above the lights and the screams and the other rides before anybody realized what was happening. This was at an amusement park at the New York/Canadian border. Later on I hear my mother boxing out the Oriental rugs on the back stairs. She's using a shillelagh someone gave her for a wedding present thirty-two years ago. From the kitchen window I can see huge clouds of dust, like a salty unlikely mist, rising high over the lawn.

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At eleven Evie comes downstairs wearing her new pink and white Etonic running shoes. She has her Walkman on and she's singing this old Madonna song. "I'm on fy-yah," she sings, "and you quench my dee-sy-yah." Two black wires hang down on either side of her jaw, like a drawbridge. She has on a pair of Ray-bans with walnut frames and lenses blacker than any black I think I've ever seen. They belong to someone who came to Evie's party a week earlier but today they're my sister's.

At around twelve-thirty the phone rings. It's Evie and she's calling from a Taco Villa in the next town over, from a pay phone. Some man lent her a quarter to make the call and now he's waiting for her to get off, probably so he can rob her. Evie's sobbing. It's the first time I've heard her cry in about ten years. She's not crying because of the man who's going to rob her, she's crying because she was jogging along the parkway when all of a sudden a swarm of greenhead flies started divebombing her Ray-bans. Somehow they managed to get underneath the lenses, at the sore skin underneath her eye. She's never seen flies act in such a bizarre, aggressive way before. She's jogged too far, six miles already, and her Walkman batteries are down and could someone, anyone, a neighbor, for God's sakes, please come and bring her back home?

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TOM WAYMAN

# A Yellow Cottage

1

Transparent waves
Of the lake
*Slap*
Onto stones and sand
Behind which steps of planks and earth
Lead up a steep bank

To a yellow cottage
One of many dwellings
That line this
Summer bay
From here
The miles of water
Reach Long Duck Island
Then wooded shores
Without houses, except
The tiny dock
Of a monastery
Then
Other islands

To the north end, where a creek
Winds back from a cove
Through marshes
And stands of maple and birch to
The first in a chain
Of empty lakes
The dirt roads
Swinging south once more
Or stopping
As the water retraces a path

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Among forest and
Distant mountains
To the edge of
The icy sea

2

A flat stone
Taken up from the beach

Held
*Like this*

And spun
Toward the sun-sparkling

Lake

An adult's hand
Propelling the stone

So it bounces
Once, twice, more

On the shimmering
Water

While a child's fingers
Scratch amid pebbles

Grasp another stone
Fling it

Down into clear waves

*No, this wcy*
Again the adult hand

Skips a stone

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Circle to circle

That hand then shows hands
How to choose

How to hold
To throw

And the child's toss this
Time

Strikes
And lifts

Soars
And lands

Soars
The stone suspended

The child's fingers

Lengthening, becoming graceful

In the bright air

3

Up at the cottage
Sounds of the birds, faint boat engines
The voices of children
From a neighbor's
Or along the lane

Trees
Around the house
Rustle

Their foliage

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A shifting pattern
Of shadow
On a yellow wall

On the wood porch floor

A white wall
Indoors, beside a window

4

Under this August sun
A woman
Is dying

Neither very young nor old, she waits
Below the noisy leaves
Watching her children play

Where she played
Much has changed, nothing
Has changed

Her parents
Still spend the hot days
Swimming, canoeing

With children, now
Grandchildren

Across the lane
In Yelle's field
Grasshoppers

Leap through the tall hay

Grasshoppers to be caught
Cupped
In an adult's hand, a child's

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Hand
And let free

5

One morning
She picks up a pail
For berries
And goes out the cottage door

She hugs each
Of her two young daughters, they
Demand to go with her
As before, but she

With her sad
Beautiful face
Sighs and

Kisses them. She embraces
Her husband
Her parents
Sisters, brother, friends

And starts to
Walk through the fields
Toward the hill

Where berries
Grow: straw-
Berries on the upland meadows
Raspberries higher in the tangled brush

As she has loved to
Girl and woman
She wants to gather, to eat while picking
And bring home

She climbs

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And sees beyond a wood on the near shore
The blue cloud of the lake
And the far Laurentians
At last, in a favorite spot
She reaches to touch
The red fruit amid
The green thorns
Placing one berry
In her mouth to
Savor
The sudden pure
Delight, she sets to work
To provide
This joy again
For the others down the hill
For all her world

Until her fingers
Discover on a stem
A pulpy
Discolored hybrid
She holds for a moment
A dark
Lump
She brings to her lips

6

Lake water
Cools the body when immersed
In the heat of day
Or warms it
After dark

In a boat's shadow
Reeds and mud are visible
On the bottom

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Minnows school
Above stones or
Furrows of sand

7

Lake air
Brings light
To the veins of the leaves
To nourish
And consume

Over this rocky shore

Where a spirit
Has left the earth

And remains

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A. R. AMMONS

# Why Is It Always the Way It Always Is

Things are so temporary, change is so imminent, there's
no use
to get angry: if your kid washes a month of mud from
under

the fenders and it slickens your driveway and your boots
with
every drizzle, don't get upset: first thing you know, your
child will be

elsewhere not a child, as if wild weather had twisted
through, leaving
you no precious world: and the mud could (slightly) build

up your flower borders or introduce a color variation into
the blooms:
who knows where fender mud comes from, a vacation trip,
a lovers'

lane, rust streaks out of the sides of mountains, field
manure;
strangeness, terrifying interest are born many ways, come
into

your life, dixie bandits in your grocery bags, parasites,
maybe
tropical, in dixie bandits' bellies: fungus: the outside
crumbles in:

you come in from pulling up weeds and strive to grind the
green

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stain from your fingers, but what traces have you left in
turning

on the faucet: traces will spread, hand to hand, person to
person, vein-out into scary leavings: where, in a vagueness
worse

than mist, will it all finally play out as separate molecules,
the dose down to neutrality: I, personally, use to thank
God

for the two oceans, one air, one water, the two gigantic
diffusers, because, I thought, we the people won't make
enough stuff

too concentrated for the great oceans' mellowing: but, now,
I don't know who to thank, the oceans having turned
milkish:

I suppose we'll have to iron out, or ironize, a place in our
heads
we imagine stark pure and take whatever comfort we can
find

residing there: if not a place, then a quality, such as a hum,
a dull constancy, a sermon on semblance, imitating
everlastingness,

an effect 80-proof oblivion: might as well keep still with
that,
a doldrummed acre among pitching mounds: distance
refines: boulders

far off are whiffy-iffy: and tumultuous arisings in the
present lean
away into fine lines of consistency way away: the smoothest
skin

is, up close, mountainous—dry gulch and gullywasher:
adding instants ease off with time: but old things recalled,

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brought back, shed reconciliations and bubble us again: I ne'er
do well except doing ne'er-do-welling well: level's level both ways.

## Motion Which Disestablishes Organizes Everything

William James (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 84) is to be
commended for penning out of our finest recommendations for the bright outlook:

he was so miserable himself he knew how to put a fine point on the exact
prescription: he knew that anybody who knows anything about human

existence knows it can be heavy; in fact, it can be so heavy it can undo
its own heaviness, the knees can crumple, the breath and heart beat,

not to mention the bowels, can become irregular, etc.: but the world,
William knew, sardonic and skeptical, can characterize sufferers of such

symptoms malingering wimps, a heaviness not to be welcomed by a person who
like me feels like one of those: weight begets weight and nature works as well

(and mindlessly) down as up; you have to put english of your own into

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the act misleading the way into lightenings: brightness,
however

desirable, is a losing battle, though, and James knew it can
be depended on
more often than not that folks won't have spare
brightnesses on them every

morning that they want your heaviness to cost them: so, in
general, if
someone asks how you are, no matter how you are, say
something nice: say,

"fine," or "marvelous morning," and, this way, hell
gradually notches up
toward paradise, a misconstruction many conspire to
forward because

nearly all, maybe all, prefer one to the other: oppositions
make things costly:
crooked teeth encourage the symmetry of braces but as
soon as everybody's

teeth are perfect, crooked teeth misalign: something is
always working
the other way: if you let the other way go, you get more in
Dutch for

while the other way at first may constitute an alternative
mainstream,
pretty soon it breaks up into dispersive tributaries and
splinters a

rondure of fine points into branches and brooklets till it
becomes
impossible to get a hold on it, a river system running
backwards:

be bright: that is a wish that can be stable: you can always
think of

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happiness because it's wished right out of any rubbings
with reality, so

you can keep the picture pure and steady: I always imagine
a hillock,
about as much as I can get up these days, with a lovely
shade tree and under

the tree this beautiful girl, unnervingly young, who
projects golden
worlds: this scene attracts me so much that even though
I'm a little

scared by it it feels enlivening, a rosy, sweet enlivening:
poets
can always prevent our hubris, reminding us how the
coffin slats peel

cloth and crack in, how the onset of time strikes at birth,
how love falters,
how past the past is, how the eyes of hungry children feed
the flies.

## Forerunners

A leaf, loose
in spring thaw,
skitters

over peppery snow-holds
and slips
on its spine down

the blacktop,
the wind
underlofting it,

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like rapids under
a skiff: it's merry:
spring is going

to come again:
dead leaves
scratch

out the news first,
while
the real

spring's lily shoots,
tipped green,
lie packed in ice.

## The Time Rate of Change

You mosey around, idling here and
there for years and years,
unaware that a waiting is hanging

out for you, and then one day
you feel a light hindrance
like a floating, cut-away spider web

touch your shoulder: and some
years later, perhaps, another,
still light but with a smallish

tug to it, and then one day you
trip and catch in an entanglement like
direction, but the direction is

rope-loose and you don't mind that
much: more years and a fine halter
of many constraints bites in,

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and a kind of speed breaks out,
not just speed but acceleration, and
you begin to look back and also,

and with equal alarm, forward,
and the speed picks up, the direction
leans, and the speed is light.

## Loving People

This enterprise answers
to none of the natural
balances, trade-off's,

exactions: it doesn't
shape to debit
and credit

differences: people are
losing propositions: what
they build flakes away,

even when they don't
take it with them:
no economy of justice,

no sparing, no
payment for services rendered
rolls this circus round:

you make your
mind up first to do it
rain or shine, giving

or taking: you decide
to decide to love:
then, here and there,

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bit by burn, a nod, a
touch, smile, the sweet
love starts showing up.

## Ah

When the forehead drains
and the limbs akimbo
freeze

so that the body can
be carried as
by stubs a log

the true sigh is not
yet but when
ground-packed

the tendons slip the
joints, the muscles run,
the bones chink loose.

## Slights of Sight

In moderate calm one
waits to see which
leaf on the maple will

go next:
the leaves are yellow,
green-ribbed yellow, and

green: not a green
one next, surely:
and not a green-ribbed

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one, either, unless
a local twist
knots the breeze:

there goes one,
yellow, likely, a
foot into fall, the letting go

too unexpected to catch,
the absence on the
branch hardly to be found.

## Fall's End

Glassy rain on the .
and day melting down:

the bony hedges ink up,
tip-end inscriptions as if

trying to scribble out of here:
this is a round prison,

the soul says, rounding
dusk into dusk:

the horizon is too gray
to part from the hills and,

now, the mist seems too
fine to shiver

the puddles: remember broad
daylight: a redbird pitches

flickering in the shrubs,
a color beyond belief.

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B. H. FAIRCHILD

# The Structures of Everyday Life

In the shop's nave, where the wind bangs sheets
of tin against iron beams, barn sparrows
quarrel like old lovers. At five o'clock
the lathes wind down from their long flight.
Black coils of steel loom from collecting bins.

In the washroom photographs of wives and lovers
look down on the backs of men pale as shells.
Brown wrists and black hands lather and shine
in the light of one dim lamp, and blue shirts
hang like the stilled hands of a deaf-mute.

When the foreman sees his raw face in the mirror,
he turns away, shy as a young girl, sick of iron
and rust, the dead sun of the day's end. After
washing, his wet hair gleams in the open door
and he begins his dream of women in cool rooms.

Gusts seep through tin, making the thin music
the men live by. Drill pipe they scar knuckles on
clangs restless as planets on the rack outside.
The six-ton hoist drags its death chain. The sky
is a gray drum, a dull hunger only the plains know.

Like children at prayer, the men kneel to lace
their shoes, touching the worn heels of a life.
When they leave, the faces on their locker doors
turn back to darkness. Each man shoulders the sun,
carries it through the fields, the lighted streets.

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PHYLLIS HOGE THOMPSON

# The Light on the Door

Something about that old house we passed
In the last town. Orleans? Coventry?
The door with long glass oval.
The pale light, failing light, canted on the blind surface,
The glow from the bevel rainbowed,
Caved in on time, on history.

Nothing in nature so catches at the well of sadness
As this, nothing. Not evocative mist
Slow-wreathing through budded woodlands,
Not breeze-blown, rippling lake water as it laps ashore,
Not warm violets shaded,
Not airy honeysuckle lattice.

This pang can come anywhere. What is the reason? I think
Such light, lilac, slopes across lives almost ours
That we didn't have—a weight
As of a slumbering presence within the walls
Of old houses, an immanence
Brooding. What we longed for.

Almost as if we could open the burnished door,
Step inside a hallway, a rose-dark room with high ceiling,
And, looking out from the other side
Through wavery glass of a tall window, find life in a lost year,
Old sunlight, rung chimes. Shimmer
Of the possible. Out of reach. Ours.

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RICHARD HORNBY

# Theatre in Washington, D. C.

FARCE AS A DRAMATIC GENRE has received increasing critical attention in recent decades. Once considered simply a low version of comedy, it more and more appears like a separate form of its own, linked to comedy more by the laughter it evokes than by its structure or techniques. If anything, the mad, obsessive nature of the characters, whose drives inevitably lead to disappointment and ruin, and the repeated pattern of spoiled rituals, broken ceremonies, and other societal collapse, make farce resemble tragedy—and indeed, if Aristotle was correct, Greek tragedy itself evolved out of the farcical satyr play.

The classicists of farce were the great French *farceurs* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Eugène Labiche and Georges Feydeau. Drawing on the comedies of Molière, the vaudevilles of Scribe, and the French love of both wit and reason, their plays have huge energy, invention, charm, and crazy inner logic. They also have big casts, many settings, and period costumes, which make them a tough bet for theatrical production today. Nonetheless, the Arena Stage in Washington, D. C., managed to present a first-rate production of Labiche's *La Cagnotte* last winter.

The play, translated by Albert Bermel as *The Piggy Bank*, deals with a group of provincial bourgeois who have saved up a kitty[1] from their card games, and decide, after much hilarious argument, to spend it on an outing in Paris. It is difficult to summarize their adventures there, since each has his or her own obsessive compulsion to complicate things, but the basic difficulties arise when, misreading a restaurant menu in which the final zeros on the prices have been accidentally covered by a border, they greedily order every fancy dish in sight, and then, presented with the actual, horrifying total, refuse to pay. Simultaneously and coincidentally, they are accused of pickpocketing; jailed, they escape and take refuge in the establishment of a marriage broker, who had arranged for Léonida, the middle-aged spinster of the group, to meet two unknown suitors there. Alas, one of the suitors turns out to be another member of the group, Cordenbois, an egotistical pharmacist whom she has known for twenty years, while the other turns out to be the police

[1] *Cagnotte* translates as *kitty* in this sense, an odd word in English that would be misleading as a title, which is the reason for Bermel's *Piggy Bank*.

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officer from whom they have just escaped. Fleeing again, they end up broke and distraught, fighting with a shopkeeper over the price of a roll to be bought with their last sous. Disaster is averted when a young lawyer from their hometown happens to arrive on the scene with enough money to get them out of their troubles and on the train for home.

Ten years ago, Peter Stein, Germany's leading avant-garde director, staged an altered version of the play. Noting the sharp satire of the bourgeoisie, and the motif of money, which is crucial to every scene (all the problems in the play arise from having either too much of it or too little), Stein gave the play a Marxist twist; in particular, he had the group at the end setting up barricades, fighting off both police and an enraged proletariat. There was no rescue; the lawyer instead just walked across the front of the stage, oblivious to them. This harsh ending, an allusion to the Parisian *Communards* of 1871 (but in reverse, since now it is the bourgeoisie behind the barricades), perhaps again demonstrates the potential affinity of farce and tragedy.

The publicity material and program for the Arena Stage production made no mention of the Stein production, but clearly either Bermel, or the director, Garland Wright, were influenced by it, since they enhanced the battle over the roll into a horrendous disaster of broken eggs and cascading milk cans, and kept the business of the barricades, though ultimately restoring Labiche's happy ending. Like Stein, they also omitted the asides and monologues of the original, or worked them into the dialogue, and deleted the vaudeville-style songs. This was no grim piece of socialist realism, however. The tone was light throughout, the pacing swift, the acting and business deftly funny. The Arena Stage, as its name implies, is in the round, the most difficult stage configuration for a director, but Wright handled it masterfully. The large cast moved briskly, performing complicated business (like the serving of the fancy meal) with ease and grace, with every important action visible to the entire audience. When the group escaped from the jail, instead of breaking through the wall, as in the original, they dug through the floor. When the milk cans tumbled in the final scene, a cataract of milk roared across the stage within a few feet of the audience on all sides, yet no one got wet; such controlled explosiveness was typical of the entire evening.

Wright was ably assisted by the set designer, John Arnone, who provided a nice sense of the period with graceful ironwork above the stage, brickwork for the floor, and delightfully elegant furniture. The costumes, designed by Martin Pakledinaz, were historically accurate, but also vividly expressive of the zany characters. But most of all, I was impressed by the fine comic acting of the large cast. Arena Stage is one of the few regional theatres in this country to draw upon local actors for most of its principal roles; most companies cast these from New York, or sometimes Los Angeles. But

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actors like Mark Hammer, as the wealthy, pompous bourgeois Boursey, or Stanley Anderson, as the pharmacist, are local Washingtonians who have worked at Arena Stage for many years, and whose acting is of national, or indeed international, caliber.

One complaint I had about the acting, however, concerned the casting and performance of Veronica Castang, who was neither old enough nor ugly enough to be right as Boursey's spinster sister. I also thought it odd to change the marriage broker into a woman (with a transvestite maid!), which caused her establishment to seem like a brothel, which it definitely is not. Nevertheless, Tana Hicken's performance in the role was perfectly adequate; perhaps this was just a necessary compromise for a production with a large cast and a limited actor pool. In general, I was impressed by the professionalism of every aspect of Arena Stage, by the esprit de corps (even the ushers and the visible stagehands seemed full of vigor and charm), by the artistic commitment. Operating for more than three decades under the remarkable artistic director Zelda Fichandler, Arena Stage continues to be one of the best theatre companies in the United States.

A much smaller group, but no less committed, is The Studio Theatre, which presented all three parts of John Byrne's *Slab Boys Trilogy* in repertory, in their intimate theatre in northwest Washington. I saw only the first play, but wished I had seen more. Set in Scotland in 1957, *The Slab Boys* is a piece of grimy naturalism in the tradition of British playwrights like Arnold Wesker or David Storey, focussing on three boys who work in the paint-grinding room of a rug dyeing factory. The boys lounge about, crack jokes, play tricks on one another, complain about the boss, and try to win the affections of Lucille, the factory sketcher and "every slab boy's dream." Occasionally they also do some work.

By implication, there is a good deal of social criticism in the action: The work of grinding paint seems so inane and wasteful (surely it must be mechanized by now), and the boys' work so slovenly, that it is no wonder that British industry has had such a terrible decline. The bosses seem more concerned with their workers' attitudes than with their output. The quasi-artistic nature of the work is ironically contrasted with the aspirations of one of the slab boys, who has just applied to art school. At the end of the play, he finds that he has been rejected—the same afternoon that he has been sacked from his job. It is a stereotypical situation, once parodied on the Monty Python television show, which depicted a rebellious youth scornfully rejecting artistic life in London for a posh job as a coal miner in the Midlands. Nevertheless, the vivid characterizations, rough humor, and lively dialogue save *The Slab Boys* from being either a dreary social protest piece or a sentimental drama about sensitive, misunderstood youth.

Joy Zinoman, Artistic and Managing Director of The Studio The-

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atre, skillfully directed the talented, young, well-balanced cast. A Scot who happened to be sitting next to me noted some errors in the accents, but they sounded good to me. Unless one is playing to an audience of native speakers, success with accents on stage is more a matter of intrinsic consistency than extrinsic accuracy; the important thing was that the entire cast of eight seemed to be speaking in a natural, organic fashion.

Russell Metheny designed the wonderfully dismal setting, the filthy, paint-spattered "slab room." Ric Thomas Rice did the admirable costumes, which not only brought back for me the fifties of my own youth, but were nicely suited to the varied individuals who wore them, which was especially important for a play in which the characters, like most adolescent youths everywhere, are very much concerned with their clothing. The Studio Theatre is a worthy company, much to be commended for attempting something as difficult (for American actors) and interesting as *Slab Boys*, and for succeeding so well.

*Rap Master Ronnie* is a cabaret review satirizing Ronald Reagan that has been touring the country since opening in New York two years ago. No one would like to see Reagan take it on the chin more than I, especially right in our capital, but the show was disappointing. I was attracted to the piece because the writing was by Gary Trudeau, a cartoonist I enjoy very much. When *Doonesbury* was off the comic pages while he was working on the unsuccessful musical comedy based on the strip, my breakfasts were a lot less fun; at least this time, the cartoons were not interrupted. But why is it that Trudeau seems to lose his sting in the theatre?

Certainly the bright and lively cast cannot be the ones to be faulted here. Wes Johnson gave a deft impersonation of the President, the best I have ever seen. For some reason, Reagan seems hard to caricature; cartoonists and impersonators had great fun with Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, and also did reasonably well with Ford and Carter, but they can't seem to capture the latest White House occupant. I had a good half-dozen friends and students who could all give hilarious impersonations of Nixon, but Reagan, who is no less distinctive in his own way (the man was, after all, a movie star), seems elusive. Nevertheless, Wes Johnson got the avuncular smile, the stiff cock of the head, the odd walk, and above all, the polished, cheerful, diaphragmatic voice, with the overly careful phrasing and self-righteous tone. He always made the show enjoyable, and the rest of the cast, especially Dori Legg as Nancy Reagan, gave him good support.

Most of the skits, however, were weakly written. There was some good dialogue ("When you're right ninety percent of the time, why quibble about the remaining three percent?" sounded like vintage Reaganese), and a few good situations: Reagan's prevarications at a

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typical press conference were one example, and the song, "Take That Smile Off Your Face," sung by a bitter black woman listing grievances while Reagan smiled benignantly, was another. But the material had not been kept up-to-date, which is essential for political cabaret theatre. I saw it at the height of the Iran-contra scandal, but no mention was made of it, although it was already appearing regularly in *Doonesbury*. For some reason, the producers (Judith Darrell, Tom Kemp, and Michael P. Wasserman), or the director (Bill Castellino, who also choreographed), seem to have felt that every skit had to lead to a musical number (Trudeau was listed as lyricist rather than as writer, even though he apparently wrote all the dialogue as well), which made alterations difficult. It also meant that each skit was weighed down by the forgettable music of Elizabeth Swados. Nor did any of the skits caricature the oddball collection of crooks, cranks, and creeps who have made up the Reagan administration, a potentially rich source of material. In the end, there was sharper satire in *Slab Boys*, or even in *The Piggy Bank*, than in *Rap Master Ronnie*.

"Shakespeare Lives at the Folger" was the title of an article in the February issue of the *National Geographic*. The world's greatest collection of Shakespeare material, the Folger Shakespeare Library on Capitol Hill is probably also the only research library in the world to have a theatre attached. Starting in 1970, it has also had a professional Shakespeare company operating in it; rising deficits almost led to its closing, but last year it was given independent status and a final grant of $330,000 from the Folger, to see if it could operate on its own.

The Shakespeare Theatre has been controversial. Some scholars felt that it was not an appropriate use of library funds. ("Think how many books you could buy for $330,000!" a Folger scholar remarked to me indignantly. "One," replied his wife sardonically, referring to the rising cost of rare books.) But the main problem was the variable quality of productions, some of which were very poor. Even some trendy, "updated" productions found their way into the Folger, the last place in the world where they would be appropriate.

It is a strange phenomenon that, despite the immense popularity of Shakespeare on the American stage—there are professional Shakespeare companies in every state of the Union—few of our directors or actors know much about his drama, besides a blunt familiarity with the texts, uninformed by literary criticism or theatre history, but often shaped by popular prejudices. Thus, even when there is no conscious "updating," productions often reduce the plays to the kind of modern psychological realism that directors and actors are used to. In particular, the poetry is looked upon as a weird artificiality; where verse was an aid to the Elizabethan actor, it is an obstacle to ours. A few years ago, I acted as dramaturg (liter-

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ary advisor) for a university production of *Macbeth*; I was unable to interest the director in the rhythms, imagery, and resonances of the poetry, because his attention was on the Macbeths' sex life, which he decided was what the play was really all about.

The board of trustees of the reorganized Folger Shakespeare Theatre have appointed Michael Kahn as the new artistic director, a promising choice this time, since Kahn is one of the best classical directors in America, who understands Shakespeare as few others do. Early in March, I saw his second production at the Folger, *The Winter's Tale*, a difficult piece that is a serious test for any Shakespeare company. Kahn, with his knowledgeable dramaturg, Genie Barton, and a fine design team, composed a production that was delicate, imaginative, and affecting.

The theatre itself is small, seating only 253; the trustees will have to attract a lot of donations to maintain a professional company in it. Intended to be a replica of an Elizabethan theatre, it is unfortunately modeled on the Cranford Adams reconstruction of the Globe of some forty years ago. Thus, the stage house is in Tudor, half-timbered style, though subsequent scholarship has demonstrated that, at the Globe and many other theatres, there was a Renaissance decor, with imitation marble columns, statues, and arches. The Folger theatre is not meant as a copy of the Globe per se, however; it is more like one of the small, indoor, "private" theatres, and some of these may well have been in the older style. What is worse about the Adams version is that he posited an "inner below," a performance space in a kind of alcove behind the platform stage, which later scholars have shown never existed in the period. Working at a time before the open stage returned to its former glory in the fifties and sixties, Adams was unconsciously trying to make the Globe into one of the proscenium theatres that he, and everybody else, were used to. This affected more than just façades and decorations; it created a ground plan that is inappropriate for Shakespeare's plays, which work best on a big open platform, with action uninterrupted by raising and lowering curtains or major scene changes.

Kahn and his set designer, Robert Edward Darling, simply avoided using the "inner below" for anything except entrances and exits in *The Winter's Tale*. The action took place on the thrust platform, which had been decorated in gray and white to give it the stark look of granite. The two permanent pillars on the stage (which are based on a famous drawing of the Swan Theatre in 1596) were similarly squared off in gray, and a circular platform about eighteen feet across was laid between them. The whole stage was given a slight rake, and the back walls made delicately asymmetrical. There was a bench in front of one of the pillars, and other minor set pieces were brought on from time to time.

The granite color and texture gave a strong feeling of winter, for the opening scenes in Shakespeare's Sicilia. At the beginning, a light

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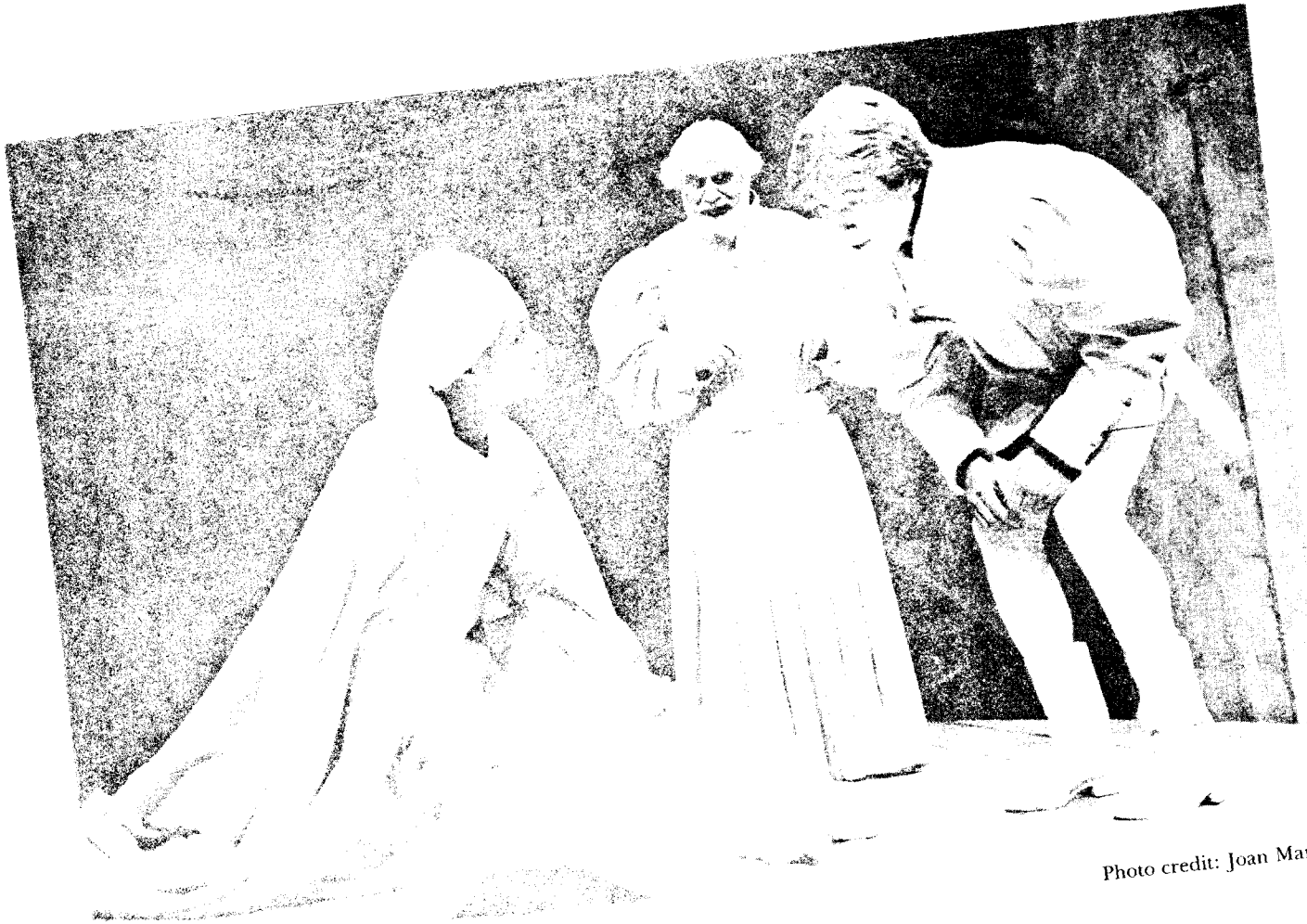

Photo credit: Joan Marcus

*Franchelle Stewart Dorn, Emery Battis and Tom Tammi in "The Winter's Tale"*

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wooden circular frame lay on top of the round central platform; the chorus character of "Time," who does not appear until Act IV, scene 1 in the text but was used silently here, appeared carrying a dead tree branch. Lit from behind, he moved forward and lifted the circular frame, which became the face of a clock, with the branch for its hand. Thus the great themes of the play, of winter and time and change, were introduced visually and gracefully, and the play began.

Visually, the production continued to be clear and beautiful throughout. The shift from Sicily to Bohemia was symbolized by adding garlands of greenery about the set. Time, the chorus, reentered, this time carrying a leafy branch, and repeated the opening business. Props were carefully chosen; for example, young Mamillius, Leontes' son, was given a top to play with, which not only was effective in terms of the character and situation, but also reinforced the cyclical theme of time. Jane Greenwood's costumes were glorious; the Sicilian, "winter" characters were all dressed in pale shades of off-white, with a range of textures—fur, brocade, corduroy, linen—used subtly to delineate characters. By contrast, the Bohemian "summer" characters wore colorful costumes of the middle spectrum—orange, yellow, green—which made them look lively and earthy, as indeed they are in the script. Greenwood, one of the world's leading costume designers, originally designed these costumes for an earlier Kahn production of the play at Stratford, Connecticut; David Roberts supervised their use here, where they looked just as good close up, in a small theatre, as they could possibly have looked originally in a large one. Indeed, they were the most beautiful costumes I have ever seen for a Shakespearean production.

The acting in the production was unfortunately not as good as the design. This is a young company, and the actors were obviously well trained. The action was always clear (no mean trick with Shakespeare), partly because of Kahn's fine mise en scène, but also because the actors approached their roles intelligently, focussing on the meaning of what was being said. At the same time, they spoke the poetry uniformly well, with a solid understanding of how blank verse operates. (This was the first production of the play I have seen in which the actors knew that Perdita's name should be emphasized on the first syllable.) Nonetheless, the principals were generally stiff in their performances, lacking both the range and the depth that the roles require.

Leontes is one of the most difficult roles in the entire canon. An Othello without a Iago, or even a handkerchief, he insists on his wife's infidelity against all external evidence, finally even defying an edict from the oracle at Delphi that verifies Hermione's chastity. Tom Tammi as Leontes showed none of this inner compulsiveness, none of the lurid fascination with infidelity, which the part de-

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mands; he just seemed like a nice young man who was vexed with his wife. Another difficulty with the part is that the fits of jealousy come on instantaneously, with no time for preparation, nowhere to build from. A Washington reviewer even faulted the play on this ground, showing how even critics can be limited by the norms of psychological realism. The change in Leontes comes on "too fast"—but then, this is not a naturalistic play about marital problems, but rather a poetic one about time itself, and the transient nature of human relationships. Leontes has just been urging his wife to entreat their guest, Polixenes, to stay, a recognizable domestic situation, but the instant that she succeeds naturalism is left behind; Leontes becomes strangely enraged, crying "Too hot, too hot! / To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods. / I have tremor cordis on me." Kahn nicely underlined the moment by having the lights dim, but Tammi showed no parallel change in volume or emotional tone. His "tremor cordis" seemed to be no more than a mild case of heartburn.

Pamela Nyberg played both Hermione and her daughter, Perdita, a common staging since they are only onstage together briefly, with Perdita silent. Nyberg, like Tammi, is too young for the senior role; tense in her mouth and neck, and tight in her voice, she seemed to be straining to suggest maturity. She was certainly better as Perdita, and perhaps when she grows older will be able to play both parts. The best acting in the show was in the secondary, less demanding roles, especially David Manis, lean and lively as the thieving Autolycus; and Franchelle Stewart Dorn, solid and intelligent as Paulina, the outspoken lady in Leontes' court. Casting was interracial, in keeping with the admirable policy suggested by Actors' Equity, by which race should not be considered except when race itself is an issue in a play. Many of America's finest Shakespearean actors have been black, a tradition that goes well back into the nineteenth century, and it is not only racist but wasteful of talent to let naturalism keep blacks out of Shakespearean roles.

All in all, the future of Shakespearean production at the Folger looks bright. It is ironic that, by making its theatre independent, the Folger Shakespeare Library may at last have a theatre that is worthy of it.

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ROBERT S. CLARK

# Music Chronicle

CARNEGIE HALL, THE DOWAGER QUEEN OF NEW YORK'S PLACES for performing music, reopened December 15 of last year after seven months' work to complete the "master plan" for its renovation and restoration. While it was closed, the main hall got a new floor, new seats, carpeting and rail wrappings, a new stage floor and a thorough restoration and paint job for the ornamental plaster. In addition, it was connected to the new air conditioning system installed in the basement in 1983—though no announcement has yet been made about when the system will go on line, making possible the extension of the hall's operating season throughout the summer. Next to the gleaming look of the decoration's cream, gold and scarlet, the most obvious change is the restoration of the proscenium arch and the shell over the stage, which had been chopped away in 1946 to make room for ventilation machinery and for lighting fixtures used to film the movie *Carnegie Hall*. The hole had been concealed ever since by curtains and canvas panels. New acoustic doors have replaced the older doors opening directly into the hall.

Outside of the main hall, the interior of the Recital Hall, now rechristened Weill Hall after generous donors, has been redesigned for better sight lines, its stage reduced in size for acoustical reasons, and its plaster and ornamentation freshened. I have not yet been in Weill Hall for music, and so must confine this report to the larger auditorium. In addition, the main backstage area has been enlarged and an entire stage-level wing added, easing one of the most serious limitations ever since construction in 1891. The main lobby, rebuilt at street level, is now much more commodious, profiting by the removal of the cumbersome flights of stairs just across from and to the right of the outside entrance doors and the relocation of the box offices to the rear, beneath the auditorium's old entrances. Access to the flanking stairways that lead to the balconies is now directly from the lobby level, and elevators now carry patrons from the lobby to the parquet and as far up as the dress circle. Carnegie Hall's publicity promised "dramatic improvements in the quality of amenities," and the promise has been more than kept.

But the more precious trust resting on the shoulders of the renovators was the main hall's fabled acoustics. By most accounts it ranked with a small group of the world's most successful acoustical designs, among them the Grosser Musikvereinsaal in Vienna, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and Symphony Hall in Boston—all

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constructed in the last three decades of the nineteenth century before the science of acoustics had fully emerged as a discipline. Carnegie Hall's architect, William Burnet Tuthill, is said to have taken more than a passing interest in acoustics and to have polled concert halls all over the world before planning Carnegie's shape and structural features, settling at last on the Salle Garnier, Paris's opera house, as one important model. He was assisted by Dankmar Adler, the partner of Louis Sullivan, who said of Adler that he was "the only man living, at the time, who had had the intelligence to discern that the matter of acoustics is not a science but an art." By the standards of the halls that rival it, Carnegie—with its seating capacity of about 2800—was too large to work, exceeding by 600 the capacity of the Salle Garnier and by 1100 that of the Musikvereinsaal. Yet, a couple of main-floor dead spots to the contrary notwithstanding, work was what it surely did. Another school of opinion reckons that the materials Carnegie shares with other late nineteenth-century structures—wood, plaster and brick, all good reflectors of sound, with load-bearing walls spanned by wooden trusses—are the secret ingredient. But whatever the explanation, recognition of Carnegie's standing among the elite was all but universal.

And now? After hearing two concerts involving the entire range of orchestral instruments as well as human voices, from positions on both the main floor and the dress circle, my preliminary judgment is that the sonics are subtly changed and qualitatively diminished, but only slightly. One of the hall's glories formerly was the solidity and richness of its bass sound, strong even when volume was low. Some small portion of that response has been lost, but the chordal underpinnings even in heavily scored orchestral passages can still be clearly apprehended.

Carnegie's sound was always remarkable too for the way orchestral choirs coalesced yet retained individuality, and for the absence of echo or false directionality from almost every seating location. The hall retains these qualities. Grouped sonorities still blend smoothly—I know of no better place to hear massed strings—but there is a heightened drive to instruments that produce strong harmonics in the upper register of the combined sound. Directionality is still excellent: from where I sat Carnegie seems not to be afflicted with the diffusion patterns that, in Avery Fisher Hall, the New York State Theater and the Metropolitan Opera, can make sounds coming from the ensemble's left-hand side seem to issue from the right. And there is no hint of that grating edge to high-volume upper-register sounds that characterizes both Fisher Hall and the Met.

I am not alone in feeling there is some loss, whatever its magnitude. In late February, the chief music critic of the New York *Times* wrote of sound that was "brilliantly clear and more spacious, but markedly less sumptuous and less focused." And I was told that Boston Symphony Orchestra musicians who have played in the hall

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since its renovation have noticed the difference, one characterization of it being a new "brittleness." I speculate that, in putting down a new and sturdier floor, partly to damp the notorious intrusions of the 57th Street subway line beneath the hall, some of the bass resonance was sacrificed—and, sad to say, the arrival of the trains, though more muffled now, is still audible.

Yet when all that is said, Carnegie Hall must still command our veneration as the premier place in New York, and probably the United States as well, to listen to orchestral music, and as such it is an appropriate locale for the concerts of the American Composers Orchestra. Now in its eleventh season, the ACO was founded by a group of composers and conductors—chief among them Dennis Russell Davies, still music advisor and principal conductor, the flutist and conductor Paul Dunkel, and the composers Nicolas Roussakis and Francis Thorne—for the purpose of keeping before the public the whole corpus of American orchestral works, from their beginnings in the middle of the nineteenth century to the present day. The ACO has dusted off works by Henry Hadley, Charles Griffes, Victor Herbert, Henry Cowell, John Cage, David Diamond, Roger Sessions and Wallingford Riegger and shown them to be full of life. It plays music by Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin, Gerry Mulligan and Cole Porter. Along with the revivals has gone a series of significant commissions from such contemporaries as John Harbison, Tobias Picker, William Bolcom, Laurie Anderson, Joseph Schwantner and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. New York or world premieres have included works by Milton Babbitt, Charles Wuorinen, Meyer Kupferman, Otto Luening, Ezra Laderman, Ernst Krenek, Ralph Shapey and Lou Harrison.

A late February program, with John Nelson conducting ably, demonstrated the orchestra's eclecticism and versatility. For the opener the group reached back to the German-American composer Charles Martin Loeffler (1861–1935) for a mammoth tone poem called *The Death of Tintagiles* (1897). Drawing its inspiration from a Maeterlinck marionette play about a doomed youth who is heir to the throne of a mythical land, this bulging engine of a score is an exemplar of the overripe *fin de siècle* French Romanticism that tried to marry the extended periods and loosened harmonies of Wagnerism to the beguiling melodies and rich orchestration of the school of Massenet and Chausson. It is skillfully composed for forces numbering about seventy-five, and certainly worth resurrecting for its opportunities for ensemble display. It also buries a solo viola d'amore in its texture, intrepidly played on this occasion by Janet Lyman Hill. And its crescendos provided the means to hear the hall's solid response, never clangorous or bulky, and with a palpable—if somewhat attenuated—burr of chordal roots in the cellos, bassoons and double basses.

Another virtuosic work of a different kind followed: a Timpani

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Concerto (1983) by William Kraft, a former timpanist and assistant conductor for the Los Angeles Philharmonic. With Joseph Passaro unflappably and sensitively managing the often astounding musico-athletic feat of the solo part on five timpani, getting more variety of sound than anyone but a timpanist would have supposed possible, the results were always enlivening and enthralling. The soloist's digital techniques go from wearing felt- or leather-fingered gloves to wielding the customary tipped or untipped sticks; the accompanying musical materials, though not memorable, were varied and attention-getting. Next came Hugo Weisgall's *A Garden Eastward* (1952), an extended cantata for soprano and orchestra on three meditative twelfth-century Hebrew poems by Moses ben Ezra rendered into English by Milton Feist. The free-flowing declamatory vocal lines enclosed repeated melodic shapes, assertive leaps and fluent melismas, and the orchestral background mixed intimations of Mahler, Weill and Hindemith. The soprano soloist, undistinguished of tone but musicianly and secure, was Andrea Cawelti.

The final piece of the afternoon was Christopher Rouse's *Gorgon* (1984). This headlong assault on the sense of hearing cannot be described better than by the composer himself. "*Gorgon* is a cry of rage, a shaking of the fist. . . . Since the time of the ancient Greeks, the gorgon has become a symbol for all terrors too immense—and too horrible—to be known. It has thus become an image of sublimated brutality and savagery, perhaps a metaphor for our own private and subconscious monsters. . . . The unifying force throughout the piece remains the consistent violence of its character and the fearsomeness of its subject." There are three movements, each named for a gorgon (Stheno, Euryale and Medusa), linked by percussion interludes the composer calls "Perseus-spells." A single metronome pulse (a quarter note equals 176) prevails throughout the work's fifteen minutes or so. The large orchestra includes a percussion battery numbering some sixty-six instruments, according to the program, and they were manned in this case by five young men whose average age looked to be about twenty-five—naturally enough, since their assignments might have incapacitated older men. Rouse's style in this instance could be dubbed minimalism to the max: repeated cells of notes from the various instrumental choirs tumbling over each other, everything going full tilt but apprehended as sonically quite static, change occurring only gradually. "Wahoo," exclaimed one young person near me as the echoes died away. It was a more fitting expletive than any I could think of.

Later in Carnegie Hall I heard the Opera Orchestra of New York and several vocal soloists in an evening devoted to the final scenes of the four constituent parts of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*. The cornerstones of these excerpts—and of the evening's expected box-office draw—were the talents of two singers, the Hungarian soprano Eva Marton, currently enjoying a vogue here, and the East Ger-

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man tenor Reiner Goldberg. Both were creditable, even if on the strength of these performances no one would reserve a place in the pantheon of Wagner artists for either of them. The eccentric and disjointed program as a whole was a qualified success.

Miss Marton was heard as Brünnhilde in two extended passages: the conclusion to Act III of *Siegfried*, from "Heil dir, Sonne! Heil dir, Licht!" to the end, with Goldberg her Siegfried, and the Immolation Scene from *Götterdämmerung*, Act III, beginning at "Schweigt eures Jammers jauchzenden Schwall." Marton's instrument has some characteristics that match Wagner's requirements: in its lower register it is strong and malleable, though often a bit tremulous; above the staff, it is almost unremittingly bright and metallic in sound, inflexible and loud. All of this works to her advantage against Wagner's massive orchestral climaxes, but narrows her expressive range and limits her effectiveness in lightly scored passages. Still, she is no stranger to the demands of Brünnhilde, and the suggestions of mastery both vocally and histrionically spurred curiosity to hear her in the entire cycle. Goldberg contributed the most consistent singing of the evening, delivering a steady and pleasing sound without much variety or character—though, given the standard that pertains these days for this role, I find it hard to carp.

The third pivotal voice in these excerpts was Roger Roloff, an American baritone with plenty of experience singing Wotan. His light instrument is weighted toward the top, so that his most effective moments lay relatively high. In Wotan's farewell to Brünnhilde, the monologue that concludes *Die Walküre*, for example, Roloff was touching in the lines beginning "Der Augen leuchtendes Paar." But there was little to indicate that he could power Wotan's authority, his anger or his ultimate bitterness. Outstanding among the supporting singers were Gweneth Bean as Erda ("Weiche, Wotan, weiche" from *Das Rheingold*) and Robert McFarland as Donner.

Eve Queler's conducting was a sometime thing. Always sensitive to the needs of the singers, she kept her orchestra nicely at bay while they were front and center, yet never permitted the music to sag or drag. Often when the orchestra was on its own there was beautiful and powerful playing, and some particularly fine solo work; many of the important themes were well shaped and vividly realized. Elsewhere significant motifs and lines passed without sufficient attention to bring them to life. Yet Queler showed she has a fine start at subduing the vastness of the tetralogy's challenge. I hope she gets many another crack at it.

It was not only the sound of the locale—raucous when winds and brass combine, harsh and strident in crescendos with high string and wind notes, inimical to satisfying blend—that was disappointing when I went to Avery Fisher Hall weeks later for a New York Phil-

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harmonic performance led by Leonard Slatkin, the capable music director of the St. Louis Symphony. The occasion was the playing of John Adams' *Harmonielehre* (1984-85), a work that has some pundits saying that the young (thirty-nine—two years older to the day than Rouse) California-resident composer has forged a synthesis between the Second Viennese School of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern and the contemporary minimalist ethos of Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Adams acknowledges both debts—the first both overtly, and allusively with the title of this composition (which translates as "Treatise on Harmony"), also the title of Arnold Schoenberg's 1910 book on the subject. Recently Adams has identified elements of fifties and sixties rock-and-roll in the work's style too. In a New York *Times* interview Adams was quoted as saying, "What sets me apart from Reich and Glass is that I am not a modernist. I embrace the whole musical past, and I don't have the kind of refined, systematic language that they have. I rely a lot more on my intuitive sense of balance." Adams complements the musical past with the literary past: he links the work's opening movement to the Sibelius Seventh Symphony, and bestows on the other two movements titles that invoke Chrétien de Troyes and Meister Eckhart (together with Adams' daughter Quackie, who figures in the apparatus of the final movement along with Michel Tournier, Günter Grass and Mahler's Fourth Symphony).

What results from this cultural stew? Nothing so diverting as Rouse's summoning of gorgons, though the orchestral lineups are similar. Many of the ingredients are the same too: obsessively repeated rhythmic patterns, hammering ostinatos, harmonic stasis, use of extreme instrumental registers. But to these Adams adds sonorities borrowed from the Schoenberg of the Orchestral Pieces of 1909 and sustained unison string lines reminiscent of Sibelius and Mahler. For these ears and this sensibility, at least, the whole is less than the sum of the parts; the elements do not synthesize, nor do they throw one another into relief in any stimulating way. What we get from Rouse is an aural flogging, crude but authentic; what Adams offers is pastiche in pretentious wrappings.

Slatkin began the program with a lively and well-played rendering of Berlioz's *Corsair* Overture, and the pianist Shura Cherkassky, joining the Philharmonic in Anton Rubinstein's fustian Concerto in D Minor for Piano and Orchestra, showed what artistic refinement and repose can do even with a lost cause.

The Metropolitan Opera's production of Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito*, now two years old, seems to me one of the company's finest in recent seasons. Of the music, David Stivender, the Met's chorus master and commentator in the program notes, is on the mark: "Metastasio's words and situations are familiar, Mozart's musical forms (especially in the large-scale arias) retain vestiges of their old

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opera seria outlines, but the content, the music itself, now inhabits a new world, the world of late Mozart." Of Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's sets, some complain that they are instances of his fixation on gigantism and decay. But here they strike me as apt, recalling those engravings of Baroque operatic scenes in which men, women and castrati posture as gods, goddesses, emperors and empresses framed by looming arches and flanked by classical columns, while ranks of similar structures vanish into the perspectives painted on the backdrop behind them.

Ponnelle's production, moreover, is a lesson in how to freshen the stilted action of eighteenth-century librettos without violating it or sneering at it: the stage movement is stately and stylized, but the parade of attitudes is relaxed just enough (Annio and Sesto recline on the stage in one scene, for example) to put the characters in touch with human feelings as we now read them. The costumes (some on loan from other current productions, I'd guess) are conventional but appropriate and colorful, and the bright lighting shows them off to good advantage.

Best of all, the musical quality is high. James Levine's supple conducting could hardly be improved upon, and though he imposes no consistency on the singers' use of appoggiaturas and embellishments, everyone in the cast I heard had a good sense of historical style. As Sesto, Tatiana Troyanos had the most to do, and she did most of it admirably. Hei-Kyung Hong's finely modulated tone made her Servilia a consistent joy, and David Rendall, though he flatted often when singing in his lower register, got around some of the title role's thorniest challenges with polish and ardor. The most compelling performance was Roberta Alexander's as Vitellia, perhaps in part because the role has more light and shade than any but Sesto. Miss Alexander's pliant tone graced high-lying passages, and she made canny use of a well-controlled chest register at the other end. Her *da capo* decorations, though perhaps on the modest side, were executed with taste and finesse. But Alexander's stylistic security differed from her colleagues' not in kind but only in degree. This was a demonstration that the Metropolitan, our leading museum of musical theater, has the artistic resources to function as an intellectual and cultural wellspring, and not just a venal purveyor of repetitive *Toscas*, *Manons* and *Trovatores* to an audience devoid of imagination.

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DEAN FLOWER

# Anywhere But Here

*Il me semble que je serais bien là où je ne suis pas, et cette question de déménagement en est une que je discute sans cesse avec mon âme.*

—Baudelaire

NOTHING IS WORSE THAN the heavy jocularity of a writer *trying* to be funny, so one begins Daniel Curley's third novel[1] (he also has four collections of stories to his credit) with a good deal of trepidation. The dust jacket seeks to beguile us with impressive words from Stanley Elkin ("epic farce . . . a shining entertainment") and some unimpressive ones from Roger Ebert, who says the novel "poses the question, what should you do on finding your mother's mummy on display in a museum?" Certainly that *mummy-mommy* joke of the title will wear thin, one supposes, but in fact it does not—it gets better. Yet who would think so from a quick summary of the *donnée*? The hero, Marc Williams (a.k.a. John Doe and Richard Roe on his forged passports), has just been released from seven years in a Mexican jail. He had come all the way from Alpha, Illinois, to arrange for his errant mother's burial in Guanajuato, then got busted when attempting to drive home in her car, every chamber and cranny of which happens to be stashed with cocaine. In prison he learned a fluent and idiomatic Spanish, but when he tries to use it on the outside, horrified desk clerks blanch and cabdrivers tremble, for it identifies him with foul-mouthed gangsters and ruthless felons. As the novel begins, Williams piously visits the gravesite only to discover that his mother's remains have mummified and been placed in the town museum. Our hero determines to take the mummy by stealth and give it a proper burial back in Alpha, Ill. Naturally, he needs a big car and something coffin-like in which to conceal mummy's spindly remains. When he buys a set of armor for this purpose and dubs it Don Q (the car is Rosinante), all that remains is the paranoiac nightmare of evading invisible pursuers: the Guanajuato police, the CIA, the Mexican Mafia (*sic*), and innumerable others covetous and suspicious of his peculiar burden.

Curley makes all this extravagant material work by means of an imperturbable narrative detachment, an echo perhaps of the stoical

[1] MUMMY, by *Daniel Curley*. Houghton Mifflin. $16.95.

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skepticism his hero adopts about his own fate. He knows when to be deadpan, when hyperbolic, when terse. Sometimes he could almost be a bitterly disillusioned tourist, as when he finds himself in "what is usually described as an undiscovered or unspoiled fishing village." But who would *want* to discover it? And given the "usual sea of trash," how *could* it be spoiled? The ironic vein is also streaked with odd allusions, as when the Guanajuato police are imagined to be "implacable Jouverts" and an old hag crouched by a cauldron "looked like Hardy's old furmity woman arrived at some further stage of disintegration that even Hardy had not been able to imagine." Bemused by the language barrier, Curley puts his hero through all kinds of double takes, misunderstandings, and dumb shows with those who waylay him, one moment flashing their machetes murderously and the next giving him the high five. A fair number of linguistic enigmas lie in wait for the reader as well, like the old witch who quips with Keats's "stout Cortez" or the moment when the foreign language convention gets inverted: " 'Sí, qué lástima,' the little old man said in English."

Somewhere skulking in the background of this cheerfully grotesque farce lies a fable that Northrop Frye or Sigmund Freud might give a name to. Like Aeneas carrying his father Anchises on his back as he leaves Troy, Curley's hero bears his mother's body (suited in an armor he associated with his dimly-remembered father) atop his indefatigable auto, a Buick Electra. Wanting only to be disburdened of her, he is fated to meet and do battle with her fierce avatars at every stage of his journey, including three visitations from her ghostly spirit and machine-gun fire from some rabid Hippolytas. The lesson here, if there actually need be one, has more to do with the nature of comedy than anything else: it needs to arise from real and deep perturbations. We can laugh uproariously at Curley's macabre story because, from the very first sentence, it demands that we pass through the "blighted gates" of death. In this, as in the mummy theft, he owes a considerable debt to Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. But the voice is entirely, delightfully his own.

Equally restless and mindful of death, Madison Smartt Bell has no interest in comedy or verbal wit. He prefers an austere prose, hewn close to the way things are. This is his first collection of stories,[2] after three novels, and it reveals a young writer experimenting impressively with different styles and genres (the flat monologue, the dialect yarn, the collage) and various settings (rural Tennessee, New York ghettos and slums, Princeton dining halls, the American West a century ago). Despite this variety Bell gravitates toward very similar protagonists: they are young men repelled by

[2] ZERO db AND OTHER STORIES, by *Madison Smartt Bell*. Ticknor & Fields. $15.95.

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conventional society with all its hypocrisies and compromises, poor but unwilling to take more than a temporary job, unsuccessful in love, choosing to hole up in a region of strangers. One character finds this cue in a book he happens upon: "He who wishes to live in peace must go to the ruins, as the madmen do." So he goes to Newark and settles in a Puerto Rican neighborhood ("It wouldn't have been entirely unfair to call the place a slum"), taking melancholy satisfaction in his isolation. So too a West Point officer chooses to head for the frontier, a Princeton student retreats to his room, a sound technician chucks his job and prefers listening to the world around him at a half-second delay through his tape recorder. There is a trace of uncritical approval in these postures of rejection and despair, a note of adolescent self-pity that perhaps Bell doesn't sufficiently criticize.

Yet it is interesting to see how his young men try to reconnect themselves with some alternative community to the ones they bitterly reject. In "The Forgotten Bridge" the narrator strikes an uneasy truce with a Puerto Rican boy who probably attempted to break into his apartment. In "Irene" the narrator is drawn into the street one festive night, becomes a part of the Spanish-speaking family around him, exchanging smiles and friendly gestures; but the language barriers are too strong, he feels ridiculed and self-conscious. He decides that his neighbors too are locked into traditions and behavior just as deadening as the ones he's rejected. In "I [Heart] NY" the speaker tries to be his brother's keeper, helping an old man who collapses on the subway, trying to stop a mugging, chasing after a thief. Trouble is, the world doesn't *want* to be helped. The funniest and richest story here is "The Lie Detector," another first-person narration by a dangling young man. Evicted in Hoboken, he finds a new place in Brooklyn, only to be squeezed for a payoff by the superintendent, a charming Puerto Rican almost as poor as he is. Boxed in by his old landlord who won't surrender deposit money and his new landlord, an Hasidic Jew who claims not to know about the payoff, the narrator (unlike other dropouts in these stories) determines to fight back. For anyone who has ever been enmeshed in the gray underworld of rental properties or at the mercy of vague and evasive landlords, this story will be utterly authentic.

Bell has a fine ear for common speech, and keeps his own language spare. Reread, the prose is full of poetic subtlety and the attention to detail is sharp. Despite the colloquial, perhaps Southern intonations, Bell's understated method reminds me of certain Irish writers like Bernard McLaverty and John McGahern. Here is a choice moment from "The Lie Detector":

> I decided I was dead. But even a snake will keep on squirming after it's been cut in half. I picked up a scrap of newspaper to read while I waited for after six to come. It was a Spanish paper

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> and after I had looked at it for a few minutes I realized it was some sort of Dear Abby column. I could make out verbs and prepositions but not the nouns, so I wasn't quite sure what the Spanish people's problems were, or how they were going to get solved. But because the column was impossible to understand it kept me amused for a nice long time.

Typically, the worst moments in life for Bell draw out his best narrative efforts. The last story in the book, about a man in Custer's army who means to find a separate peace, sums up in its title Bell's pervading message and tone: "Today Is a Good Day to Die."

While Bell's young men move from one leaky apartment to another, looking for an elusive peace devoid of human decibels, Elizabeth Tallent's young women change marriages and whole regions of the country. Her recently reissued first book of stories (1983)[3] embodies the theme that has proved central in all her subsequent work: Americans—that is, the educated, affluent, urbanized professional class—are all in constant flight, unable to land anywhere securely, unhappily winging it. They don't mind decibels and take on all sorts of complicated new responsibilities. But it gets them nowhere. Tallent's typical central figure is likely to be a woman recently divorced or separated and now attached to a man whose ex-wife's lover distresses the teen-ager she (the protagonist) must now become a mother to. Sound familiar? Ann Beattie, Alice Adams, and a host of other women have been working this vein energetically of late, not without reason. For a large segment of the reading public, romantic divorce and the familial incongruities that spring from it have become virtually archetypal. Tallent handles the subject better than anyone except, perhaps, Beattie.

Her stories evolve through a series of finely-etched vignettes, moving forward and back in time, until all the pieces lock together. Usually a self-effacing female, her narrator will begin by describing an animal or a child, the airplane trip her husband took yesterday, or the way her lover skips stones on water. Each segment has a sharpness of edge, a close-up exactness, that suggests a need to fix emotions in very particular things. Tallent couldn't write without proper nouns, it seems: a red Adidas, not a running shoe; Chianti, not wine; a Volvo or a Fiat, not a car. Similarly a cat must be a tortoise-shell or Abyssinian or a tomcat with "an unhealed cut, the depth of a dime, in his left ear," never just a generic cat. This selective precision is almost always handled beautifully, like a *trompe l'oeil* painting in words: "muddy banks, the water shining like rinsed slate, curls of foam linking the bunched stems of the cattails whose heads dip forward each time the wind hits them, loosing tufts of

[3] IN CONSTANT FLIGHT, by *Elizabeth Tallent*. Owl Books, Henry Holt & Company. $6.95p.

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white seeds." Tallent likes to cut sharply from one vignette to another, never holding the camera anywhere too long, inviting us to discover the logic of her montage.

Some stories veer into the mildly surrealistic, like the wonderful "Comings and Goings," where a woman who admits to being good at mind-reading (her husband does it professionally) imagines with uncanny exactness all the intimate details of her husband's new mistress in another city, from the patterns on her bedsheets to the appearance of her previous lover (a balding sitar-player with dirty feet and a mustard-colored robe!). Tallent also likes to play off a painful domestic crisis against some supremely factual material, like a lecture on astronomy, a description of swans, or an explanation of a video game. Her skill in finding personal metaphors in this encyclopedia-style material is always a delight to recognize. There seem to be no hesitations or missteps in Tallent's elegant technique, nor the faintest whiff of a solecism. By paradoxical contrast, her characters hesitate and misstep almost constantly, faltering toward yet another separation. Like the woman in "Keats" who has left her husband in Cheyenne and now realizes her lover in San Francisco is selfish and shallow. Shall she go or stay? Unwilling to decide, she longs for her dog, Keats, and calls "home" compulsively to ask about him and feel the sharp edges of her sadness. The greater sadness here derives, I think, from the virtual placelessness of Tallent's otherwise firmly-anchored stories. Set in Boulder or L.A. or Kansas City, they could just as well take place in Seattle or Washington, D.C. Identities too are anonymous, a function of ambition and performance rather than an inner-directed self. Dennis is a scriptwriter, Jill an actress, Leigh a choreographer, Jennifer an oboist married to Gregory an astronomer. Dramatic posers all, they cling to their masks for lack of anything else.

Europeans seem relatively free of such ailments, perhaps in part because so many forces—geography, tradition, economics, language—serve to fix their identities in place. Two recently translated German novels provide good cases in point. Both concern cohesive individualistic communities imperilled by the manias of Nazism. The first, a novel by Hermann Broch begun in 1935 and occasionally revised,[4] was left unfinished at his death in American exile in 1951. The only "complete" version of the work in German, *Die Verzauberung*, did not appear until 1976. Now the writer's son has edited and translated the book his father was never satisfied with, and a peculiar, feverishly rhetorical performance it is. Set in an idyllic Tyrolean village, the story is all bucolic pastoral until a scurvy little stranger wanders in among the peasants and sows discord. He seems to cast a nasty spell on nearly everyone, playing upon greed

[4] THE SPELL, by *Hermann Broch*. Translated by H. F. Broch de Rotherman. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $22.50.

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and fear, spreading reactionary ideas, setting in motion militaristic youth groups and violent rituals. Transparently the story asks to be taken as a political allegory of the rise of Nazism and as a meditation on the question of why Hitler could have cast such a spell over Germany. But I doubt that any historian would want to identify Broch's weaselly villain, Marius Ratti, with the likes of Hitler. Ratti seems more like Flem Snopes, who infects other people offstage somehow, then lounges about sardonically to watch the confusion. Not once does Broch show him to be the preachy fanatic everyone claims he is, but whether this be by novelistic lapse or design I cannot tell.

The most complex and interesting character in the story is the narrator, purportedly a simple country doctor who trudges about the village performing his useful work, the antithesis of Ratti with his cure-alls. But inside the doctor's head writhe the most tortured romantic yearnings and breast-beatings and the most endlessly groping sentences this side of *The Wild Palms*. Broch ran a textile mill in Vienna until 1925 and had a late, uneasy conversion to the literary life. Thus his doctor-narrator raves on about natural beauty and the monuments of human learning with a distinctly naive seriousness, the spirits of young Werther and Faust throbbing in his heart. Soon it dawns on the reader why *this* character, at least, was susceptible to the temptations of an idealistic fanatic: he *is* one. In a long episode added (shrewdly, I think) to Broch's text from a related manuscript, the doctor recollects his former life in a big city hospital and his frustrated passion for a woman who ends her brilliant medical career by suicide. Broch seems to be saying that all systems of belief or philosophy are delusive, yet his narrator gets caught up again and again in a passionately confused rhetoric that suggests he is the victim of his own spells. It makes for a curiously dated book, oddly akin to the rhetorical outpourings of Thomas Wolfe, James Agee, Richard Wright, and Faulkner (at his weakest) coming out in America at about this time.

The other German novel to deal with a threatened community is Horst Bienek's *September Light*,[5] the second volume of a tetralogy set in the author's native Gleiwitz in Upper Silesia, now part of Poland. Bienek's purpose is to recreate the complex social fabric of the town on a day (September 1, 1939) when the Germans invaded Poland. The war remains an ominous rumble in the background; the main events are the funeral and wake following the death of Leo Piontek. Everybody gathers for these two rituals and Bienek skillfully weaves his novel around them, shifting from one point of view to another (there are about fifteen of these with four or five dominant) until we come to know what almost everyone is thinking. What makes

[5] SEPTEMBER LIGHT, by *Horst Bienek*. Translated by Ralph R. Read. Atheneum. $17.95.

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them a community? They are all Roman Catholic, except for a half-Jew who commits suicide, a Jewish poet from Berlin who chooses this day to return to his birthplace, and a few others. They all speak German, except for a steady trickle of dialectal and Polish words which have been wisely left untranslated. "Don't we all speak German here?" asks one character. "*Naturalnie* we talk German; therefore we are German." But in fact they are neither German nor Polish nor Prussian nor Austrian. Theirs is a frontier country whose boundaries have long been moved one way and another. But they can be *like* Germans. In one memorable episode a gang of boys tyrannize a "little Polack," fill his pockets with stones, and push him into a river—an awful parody of that day's brutal assault on Poland. Bienek's awareness of political victimization is acute, abetted by the five years of forced labor he spent in a Russian gulag.

The title and part of Bienek's inspiration derive from Faulkner, particularly *Light in August* whose intertwined narratives suggest how a community can be made up of outcasts and pariahs. September light filters down, "now sharper, now weaker," throughout the novel, sometimes "practically stabbing." Belonging neither to summer nor fall, the light is dangerously ambiguous, neither one thing nor another, like the country itself. Bienek shows the impending breakup of several families, as death, ambition, greed, and prejudice work to disintegrate old loyalties. But he avoids high drama: these characters have very few choices. Even so, the view is not despairing. Bienek's many strong characters have learned—or are learning—to accept pain and go on. As one old Jew expresses it near the end of the novel, he is beyond anxiety. "I no longer belong to myself," he says. "I belong to the community."

Peter Taylor appears to belong to his community in a rare and enviable way, for an American writer at least. He grew up in and around Memphis and Nashville, and has been writing stories about the "old order" of his region for more than four decades. He doesn't appear to quarrel with his rich but morally problematic inheritance, as Faulkner or Robert Lowell so dramatically do with theirs. We recognize this fact at once from the voice Taylor has developed over the years: elegant, civilized, leisurely, always modulated, a bit lofty at times, unwilling to descend into too many particulars, but patient, reassuring, judicious, scrupulously fair. His latest novel[6] (only his second in a prolific short-story-writing career) exhibits this superb voice to perfection. Unwary readers will be tempted to assume it fits Taylor himself, but of course the beauty of the novel is to see how and where it does not.

Forty-nine-year-old Phillip Carver tells the story of being summoned home to Memphis by his two unmarried sisters at the moment when his father, an elderly widower, decides to remarry and

[6] A SUMMONS TO MEMPHIS, by *Peter Taylor*. Alfred A. Knopf. $15.95.

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so disinherit his children. Phillip lives quietly in New York, a successful literary editor but a bit anti-social, glad to be far away from family ties. Unmarried (the novel will explain why), he has just separated sadly from a woman fifteen years younger. Allowing himself to be summoned to Memphis, the narrator travels back into the traumatic events of his childhood and the family's history. He recalls especially the fateful time in 1931 when his father was betrayed by a Nashville business partner, and they all had to move to Memphis and start over. In family legend, this was a death knell, an Expulsion from the Garden. "We were like the Cherokees [his mother liked to say] being driven from their ancestral lands on the notorious Trail of Tears." The father's reaction was to cast his former friend as Satan, and the man's name (Shackleford) becomes anathema. The reaction of the children, however, is to blame father for blighting their lives.

Taylor manages to interfuse two very different stories in Phillip's remembrance of things past: the traumatic events as they originally were understood, clothed in all the myth, hyperbole, and rhetoric that emotional stress tends to produce, and those same events considered in the light of greater maturity and detachment. "I cannot resist the opportunity to point out how the evil which men like Lewis Shackleford do," he writes, "has its effect at last upon myriads of persons in all the millennia to come." He blames *both* Shackleford and his father for destroying "all balance, poise, health that [the family] had to have in order to survive." It had a "shattering impact" that took away his mother's reason for being, arrested the emotional development of his two sisters in a perpetual adolescence, caused the early death of his brother who enlisted and was shot down on D-Day, and for himself had an effect "possibly still worse." Even as he makes these extravagant claims, however, he recognizes other corrective truths. Their mother wasn't destroyed; the family prospered despite disappointments; Lewis Shackleford was an ambitious man, reckless and weak, but not the archfiend. And what really did those cataclysmic differences between Nashville and Memphis amount to? Nashville was *felt* to be more traditional and cultured, Memphis was *thought* to be vulgarly mercantile. They were only two hundred and twenty miles apart, but "when Father spoke, one felt that it was more like two hundred twenty thousand miles."

Taylor's sense of the past is thus entirely free of nostalgia or sentimental reverence for the old order. He shows it to be above all a function of our turbulent memories and desires, both notoriously untrustworthy but very hard to dislodge. The novel is full of surprises and discoveries about what really happened and above all why, delivered with a fine Jamesian sense of suspense. Taylor is working now at the height of his powers, and should not be missed.

Fine as Taylor's novel is, there's an even better book to put everything aside for and read at once: Mona Simpson's long, funny, racy,

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passionately detailed study of an ambitious mother who drags her daughter off to Hollywood to seek the American Dream.[7] Adele is a fugitive from the Midwest, a place called Bay City, Wisconsin, and a veteran of two reckless marriages (one to an Iranian college professor, the other to a sleek ice-skating instructor). She is also a victim of every fashion magazine's image of what a woman should look like in order to snare Mr. Right. Anywhere but here is where she relentlessly dreams of being, and at the end of the novel she is still lying to herself about where that is. We view this brassy, monstrously selfish, oddly cruel-but-innocent woman from the eyes of her twelve-year-old daughter, Ann, veteran herself of a thousand embarrassments but who has ways of paying back her tormentor. The opening sentence of the novel is, "We fought." And indeed they do, making Lolita and Charlotte Haze look like pals. Adele has the expert neurotic's habit of bullying someone and then playing the martyr when things don't pan out. Ann fights back with silence, tears, running away, and calculated defiance. When they arrive in Los Angeles, Adele cannot *bear* to appear at the Bel Air Hotel all sweaty and rumpled from the trip, so she does a complete wash and change of clothes in the ladies' room of the Hamburger Hamlet (where, a few grim years later, she will be forced to waitress). Then she makes Ann do the same. *Then* she wants the Lincoln Continental washed, but by *hand* because she's worried about what a machine wash will do to the paint.

Through all this Ann remains shrewdly skeptical and resilient, determined to escape as soon as she's eighteen. Inevitably, however, she is shaped by her mother's desperate hungers. They *both* find solace in ice-cream cones and think nothing (poor as they are) of devouring a pint of Häagen-Dazs apiece. The truth is, they need each other desperately, Ann because she needs a parent's love and there's nobody else to choose, Adele because she's too old to realize her romantic dreams except vicariously through her daughter—or rather, through the images she would project upon this uncooperative version of herself. But this is by no means another Hollywood novel. Simpson moves back and forth between "home," the Midwest where they came from, and the California whose riches elude them. As much documentation is given to Bay City and the family history as there is to their desperate existence in L.A. Much of the story is told, for example, in the voice of Carol, Adele's unhappy sister who never left home, allowing us to see how they are different sides of the same coin. But the vital center of the book are its two central figures. One hardly knows which is the more brilliantly realized character, Ann or her mother. If I had to choose, I would pick the mother, but they are clearly inseparable. For example:

[7] ANYWHERE BUT HERE, by *Mona Simpson*. Alfred A. Knopf. $18.95.

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> My mother called room service for a pitcher of fresh lemonade, told them not too much sugar, but some sugar, like yesterday, a pinch, just enough so it was sweet. Sweet, but a little tart, too. Come to think of it, yesterday tasted a little too tart, but the day before was perfect. This all on the telephone. My mother was the kind of customer a waitress would like to kill.

I can't think of a recent novelist who *renders* more of American life than Simpson dares to do, or offers a more dispassionate look at our peculiar styles of nomadic materialism. Simpson's title derives from Emerson, interestingly enough: Americans hunger for they don't really know what. That theme needs to be done all over again with each new generation, it seems. It all reminds me of Baudelaire's dreadful conversation with his soul.

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ALICE BLOOM

# Shorted Out

I'VE JUST READ 312 NEW SHORT STORIES—American, European, Latin American. As a review is on some level a piece of advice anyway (buy, read, take seriously, etc., or don't) I'll begin with my piece and say: don't do this, don't read 312 or even 12 in a row. One, well okay, three stuffed mushrooms, a few brief interesting or amusing conversations, make for a pretty good stand-up party. But after 312 however savoury niblets of taste and talk one is both bloated and undernourished, muzzy, as though deprived of deep sleep (long talks, whole sit-down meals, a novel). Pick another metaphor and say, like a single yellow rose, a short story shows up best in the mind if placed against a relatively bare background.

I'd go further, advise that no single volume of anyone's stories, even Lawrence or Turgenev, should be read at one sitting. If the writer is good, then you want to live there longer, deeper—for a novel. If the writer's not so good, then all the failures of omission and commission become tics, present themselves boldly at entrance, and you don't even want to visit. Either irritable state of mind is unfair to the form, and either can be somewhat avoided if stories are read one at a time.

So much for advice; and with an exception in the collections reviewed here. You may as well go ahead and read all 17 of Ron Carlson's stories in *The News of the World*,[1] because if the next one is as quirky and thrilling as the one you just finished, are you going to listen to me? These stories are new, news, and if Carlson started to tell one at that above mentioned party, you'd have the impulse to say let's go around the corner to someplace quiet so I can hear you talk. His stories have something I've been hungry to hear, and his quiet, familiar style is so seductive, convincing, that I am led to believe that his ordinary (wives, husbands, parents, babies, modern Americans) people have elaborate, you could even say baroque, and not minimal lives; and they have speech, too. A kind of friendly, naked, confidential prattle or ramble, not fancy but expressive and wide-ranging, is the characteristic narrative voice. (16 of the 17 stories are first-person narration.) For example, the narrator of "Phenomena" is a small-town cop, explaining, as though he were off-duty with all the time in the world, and leaning at you over a table

[1] THE NEWS OF THE WORLD, by *Ron Carlson*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. $15.95.

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for two in a roadside diner, the weird experience he's just had meeting up with a flying saucer on one of his late-night rounds. (This flying saucer turns out at the end of the story to be an elusive metaphor for the commonplace loneliness, dailiness, and sheer stuck-ness in the soul of a nice man who's grown old doing his humble duty, but that resonance in the metaphor, along with the suggestion that this man went momentarily crazy, doesn't interfere with the "this was my real life experience" feel of the story.) The rhythm of the way in which moot information is given, especially in country talk—you work *up* to it, circling—Carlson's ear wonderfully catches and mimes, in this and other stories:

> First of all, I'm not one of these people who ever wanted to see a UFO, an unidentified flying object. I have never wanted to see an unidentified anything. The things in my life, I identify; that's good with me. I'm not one of these people who is strange or weirded-out over unexplainable phenomena. I don't want any phenomena at all, and we're lucky in Cooper, because there isn't much phenomena. About the time there is a little phenomena, I identify the phenomena and throw them in jail.
>
> I'm the sheriff.
>
> So I'm not a weirdo. Things happen sometimes and I do my best.

Another example: a modern man, we've met him about 10,000 times now, in need of world myth, meaning, connection to something enduring, could be presented and certainly has been, in all his absurdity, impotence, disappointment; but in "The H Street Sledding Record," this man is not only content but tickled with his yearly Christmas Eve habit of tossing horse manure up on his roof and letting his child know it's proof of reindeer. In "Bigfoot Stole My Wife," a man patiently explains that exactly this has happened, and here are the reasons why. In the next short monologue, "I Am Bigfoot," Bigfoot just as patiently, plangently explains that this is wrong; he doesn't *steal* wives; he doesn't have to; all he has to do is *call them* and they come. "Things get lovely when I call," Bigfoot explains. In "Life Before Science," a husband who's given up on sperm count tests, thermometers, laparoscopies and the other paraphernalia of modern clinics, gets an old book from the local library, looks up charms related to fertility, orders 200 pounds of fresh garlic and nails it around every opening to his house. At the end, there aren't any children yet, but there are some new paintings of who they might be (the man is also a painter with painter's block), a wife who thinks he's nuts but wonderful, and the feeling in this Common Reader that the garlic just might work. Not that these stories have happy endings (though they do end, and that's sort of new again, isn't it?); they have something better: happy actions in bad times.

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The overall effect, however, is not so much that Carlson's plain people are imaginative and high-spirited, but that Spirit has taken up residence in their bodies. They seem gifted or touched, like peasants in old tales who can converse with forest creatures. They see themselves as normal ("I'm not a weirdo") and also see as perfectly normal the fact of their being artists of life, inventors, culture-creators, magicians in some old benign folk sense. Which is to say too, these characters are not stuck in emptiness or longing, or, more fashionable lately, stuck in not knowing they long; and for how many years has fiction been telling us those were the choices, the realistic human lot nowadays. Carlson's characters have a problem—love has failed; God is dead; life is short; things just aren't working out—and, they solve it. Having solved it, and the stories are often a detailed report of how, they stand back and survey their success with unsoured pleasure. So does Carlson. So do we. *His* spirit kept reminding me, not of some other writer, but of Peewee Herman and his "Playhouse." The Playhouse, despite its flying bikes, armchairs that hug you, fridge full of mambo-ing carrots and lunchmeat in sunglasses, etc., still powerfully suggests for half an hour (10 a.m., EST, Saturdays) that this is not mere surrealism but what is most real. That this is not Peewee's alone, but your house if you could but inscape it, and presumably most five-year-olds can do that fairly easily. Five-year-olds (and many older, too; forty-five, say) feel talked *up* to.

There's a mousehole on the show into which the camera often peeks. Peewee's creative problem here, and it's Ron Carlson's too, and in fact, it's the creative problem of any short-story writer, is, how to make a mousehole contain news of the world? Have a nature lesson? See the habits of mice? Cut the footage of them snacking on their young? or keep it? Dress them in space suits, have them battle Martian Rats? Or, dressed in aprons and small dark pants, keeping human house? No, none of the above. Get rid of the mice. Keep the hole. Put in dinosaurs! All kinds, animated clay, jerky and messy in their clayish movements, but all with something to say. Now put a problem knocking at the Playhouse door, a monster of some up-to-date kind, and have Peewee, in his dithering elegant way, ask the dinosaurs or the dancing lunchmeat for advice, have them sensibly give it, have Peewee take it, act on it; news from the world, indeed. And then when Peewee gives the word of the day—"please," or "good"—and tells you to scream everytime and anyplace you hear it for the upcoming week, you don't forget that word!

In short, take a small hole low in the wall, look in, and see a new thing about life in there. The man and his wife and daughter bring home the Christmas tree in "The H Street Sledding Record," and the man says:

> While the two women begin decorating the tree with the arti-

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facts of our many Christmases together, I will thread popcorn onto a long string. It is a ritual I prefer for its uniqueness; the fact that once a year I get to sit and watch the two girls I am related to move about a tree inside our home, while I sit nearby and sew food.

I think you'll want to read these stories as fast as you can, and hope for more. Meantime, Carlson has two other books, novels, *Betrayed By F. Scott Fitzgerald* (see what I mean? who that wasn't?) and *Truants*.

Ann Beattie's new collection *Where You'll Find Me*[2] is, alas, by Ann Beattie. The hole is empty, even of mice. Evidently though, there are thousands of people someplace who like to look into an empty hole, and will probably enjoy and admire these typical, clipped, chilly, superior, bemused little camera frissons of empty American space. I just don't.

Old-fashioned mice, oh the hell with it, old-fashioned yellow roses, masses of them, on wallpaper, satisfyingly repeated, crowded, and possibly back in style what with the recent decorating mind for dogs, chintz, family photos in silver and all, are found in abundance in the recently collected stories of Jessamyn West,[3] Harvey Swados,[4] and to some extent (his stories are thornier, less comfortable, prickly, bothersome) of Wright Morris.[5] (The "uncollected stories" by Christina Stead in *Ocean of Story*,[6] are more like D.T.'s than roses on the wall, disturbing because the style is so skewed, hallucinatory, slant-wise, odd, that the stories seem badly translated; though of course, Stead wrote in English. Perhaps they should have remained uncollected.) West, Swados, and Morris are generous with content, plot, invention, sympathies, details, maximum interest in their many and interesting characters, and substantial resolutions. There's not a story in the bunch that is Fiction Workshoppy. Having thought for years that Jessamyn West wrote books only for older adolescents, I was pleased to be wrong and to be inside her strong, clearly adult tales for several days. Though finally (too many, too fast? perhaps) they began to seem pat and tidy, or dated; dating from a time (and they are from the forties, fifties, etc.) that thought life was tidier and certainly more polite and solid and what's more, probably here to stay. Things still held; there's lots of good old understandable sin, and human decency to match it; regular family meals, marriage, observation of church, state, and civilization in general, and these firm boundaries—oh happy, lost days—seem to be the assumed frame for the characters and their plots. I enjoyed these sto-

[2] WHERE YOU'LL FIND ME, by *Ann Beattie*. Linden Press/Simon & Schuster. $14.95.

[3] COLLECTED STORIES, by *Jessamyn West*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $17.95.

[4] NIGHTS IN THE GARDENS OF BROOKLYN: The Collected Stories, by *Harvey Swados*. Viking. $19.95.

[5] COLLECTED STORIES 1948-1986, by *Wright Morris*. Harper & Row. $17.95.

[6] OCEAN OF STORY, by *Christina Stead*. Viking. $19.95

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ries, and think they might be better in less tense times when a taint of nostalgia wouldn't enter into the reading, as it also did with the more various, vigorous (heavens; manly, maybe) stories of Harvey Swados. These, however, did often move (unlike most of West's) outside what can be talked or thought about if your milieu is restricted to a family home in a small town in California before California was California as it is *now*. I liked Swados' several stories set abroad best: "Year of Grace," "A Hot Day in Nuevo Laredo," "The Peacocks of Avignon," and others, though the more famous New York stories are thick and wonderful, too. One thing that seems "manly" is that Swados is so good at portraying the workings of smart women. It is also good that these stories are now collected; a moving and informative introduction by his son, Robin Swados, opens the book. These stories deserve living with, savoring slowly.

Penelope Gilliatt's *22 Stories*[7] and *Doing the Voices* by Jeremy Brooks[8] are British, ultra modern, thoroughly and exclusively adult, mordant, urban, urbane, intelligent in a brittle sort of way, dreadfully polished and witty and knowing and somewhat, if not altogether, mandarin. Fun, though. A bit wicked. The way one feels looking closely at a candid photo of no-longer-young, lesser royalty caught out in an unbecoming swimsuit.

Joseph Roth, an Austrian by birth, who spent the last years of his short life in exile, dying in Paris in 1939, wrote thirteen novels, many essays and stories. Many of his works, including the recently translated, by John Hoare, three long stories in *Hotel Savoy*,[9] are now being published, some of them in English for the first time, by the American house, Overlook Press, which must be given much credit for the revival of interest in this masterful writer. The jacket note says that Roth was "one of the central figures in the émigré intellectual opposition to the Nazis." The jacket illustration tells us what world these stories will describe: it is a George Grosz night cabaret scene; lurid colors, a sleazy, half-dressed tart in a green evening gown, obsequious waiters, effete officers, and foreground—a table of Grosz's evil, meaty, pig-eyed, bare-skulled, cigar-smoking businessmen, manufacturers, industrialists, whatever they may be, their heavy lower hunkers suggesting all the dark secret forces gathering explosive power in Europe between the wars. The Hotel Savoy of the title novella is this cabaret, a ship of fools with 864 rooms, all of them occupied with the pathetic or sinister multi-national displaced persons who streamed homeless up into the streets of this time like small vermin scrambling for new places after their tenement has been dynamited down. The Hotel is the center of an unnamed, rain- and coaldust-swept industrial town, ambiguously located on an eastern European border. This is the setting of a politi-

[7] 22 STORIES, by *Penelope Gilliatt*. Dodd, Mead & Company. $19.95.
[8] DOING THE VOICES, by *Jeremy Brooks*. Viking Salamander. $14.95.
[9] HOTEL SAVOY, by *Joseph Roth*. Translated by John Hoare. Overlook Press. $16.95.

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cal parable, of course, which this novella is—acid with irony, but informed by profound anger and sympathy, too, and sharp brilliant portraits of the individual homeless. They occupy their hotel rooms, which are big and sumptuous on the lower floors, increasingly dark, small, and unwholesome as the hotel rises, with the poorest—gypsies, actresses, dying clowns, intellectuals, money changers, revolutionaries, etc.—living on the top. All of them, without exception, are waiting; waiting for something to happen. The non-fiction study of this waiting is George Steiner's *In Bluebeard's Castle*. Roth's people are waiting for the arrival, any moment now, of Bloomfield, a native of this town but now an American industrialist who, when he comes, will salvage every bad situation, repair every life. Time passes, but idly, frivolously, desperately, with much passive restlessness. Finally Bloomfield comes, at night, in a big American car; he too checks into Hotel Savoy and holds silent court for some days in the lobby; everyone is delirious with insane hope; and then Bloomfield abruptly decamps, having done nothing at all but make a ceremonial visit to the grave of his father in the Jewish cemetery at the edge of town, which was his only intention all along.

Like "Hotel Savoy," the remaining two stories are political parables, but the word "parable" is too stiff and limited to do justice to the human richness and moral intelligence of Roth's writing. We must be grateful to Overlook Press and to the skilled translators for putting these books into our current ship of fools' world. They remind us that the most carefully observed local life leads us to what is most universal; and they remind us, too, that a universe of people was out there, is out there, wanting, as we do now, safe and intelligent passage.

I want to recommend, if only briefly, two more volumes of political tales/parables: *Stories*, by Sergio Ramirez,[10] Nicaragua's leading prose writer as well as that country's vice president; and *My Merry Mornings*, subtitled "Stories from Prague," translated by George Theiner, and written by Ivan Klima,[11] who was for a brief time teaching at the University of Michigan but who returned to Prague in 1970. There, the jacket note tells us, Klima's work "circulates in hand-typed, lovingly bound, 'padlock editions,' along with other banned writers like Kafka, Orwell, Kundera, and Škvorecký." There is nothing "merry" about these stories, or Ramirez's either, though both are often wry or funny. Klima, in subject and point of view, resembles Kundera: a dry tone, an ambition to find new formal shapes; and a contents of daily life made up of petty schemes, petty graft, petty sex, petty protest, massive amnesia, and occasional useless nobility of thought, feeling, or action. An old professor, for example, in Klima's "A Foolish Tale," attempts, well aware of the

[10] STORIES, by *Sergio Ramirez*. Translated by Nick Caistor. Readers International. $14.95.

[11] MY MERRY MORNINGS, by *Ivan Klima*. Translated by George Theiner. Readers International. $14.95.

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danger of his enterprise, to keep the underground of intelligence alive by distributing those hand-copied writings of those who are critical or contradictory of the regime; this writing, all kinds of it, he carries with him in a locked briefcase. But he keeps forgetting the numbers of the combination. Both these books, as well as other contemporary literature "of quality," from Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe are published and distributed by Readers International which, it says on the cover, is "particularly committed to conserving literature in danger."

For better and for worse, American fiction is not at present in this kind of clear "danger." I have neither space here nor anything like the necessary knowledge to press the point, but it is clear, reading through a stack of new writing from around the world, that by and large, American fiction writers, at least those who are most widely read (and translated), are not taking on the same subjects or scope as their counterparts abroad, especially in Third World countries. Whether it is our writers who are not making the connection, or whether they are simply showing that in real life there is little connecting, simply put, we do not have popular political writing. Then again perhaps we are only receiving, from abroad, their political writing, and Czechs and Salvadorans also have their versions of semi-literate, mass-market "romances" and other "fun" literature, as well as their version of our literate, mass-market, middle-brow novels of manners. There must be a hundred things to take into consideration, and I want only to suggest here, as have others, that this is a serious, complex subject. (For well-informed and penetrating views, may I suggest *The Writer in Our World*, the papers and panel discussions of a symposium sponsored by *TriQuarterly*, published in book form by The Atlantic Monthly Press in 1986.)

But to return for a moment to my point: by "political writing" I mean writing which sets the character's individual felt life in the larger but no less immediate context of his country's reality, one which he shares with many others. (Ron Carlson's stories, as lovely and interesting as they are, are nevertheless about almost eccentric private life, even though they do suggest that everybody does have one of those.) The characters in our books—individuals, families, small groups—seem, no matter how well done, adrift in time and geography, as though they hadn't heard the news for a long long time. American characters *still* seem to be facing a wilderness, I mean, a real wilderness; and God knows that has not been our reality for quite some time now. Though American characters feel themselves connected to values, to moral questions, and so forth, their daily concerns and experiences as reported to us in our fiction seem to remain, for all the carefully observed and detailed domesticity, manners, feelings, and so forth, oddly mythic, vague, abstract; and even when they live entrenched in city or suburb, there's yet a touching but nevertheless irrelevant quality about them, a per-

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manent Natty Bumppoism, as though there were even now wind and space and trees and abstract morality around them on all sides, and somewhere in the distance, the smoke of an unknown campfire. That this smoke might be evidence of a *government*, of a huge, pervasive, mutually experienced culture, doesn't seem to enter very deeply the experience of American characters.

The lasting impression our best current writers make, and I will close with a few notes of praise for two of them—Stuart Dybek and Jack Pulaski—is that each one is a separate, brilliant case. They could not be better than they are. Each story in Dybek's *Childhood And Other Neighborhoods*,[12] each story in Pulaski's *The St. Veronica Gig Stories*,[13] each scene, each sentence, sometimes phrases, are so written; by which I mean that one is constantly aware of, admiring of, awe-stricken sometimes by, the power and variety of our language, and by the craft exhibited here. Dybek's stories are set in the ethnic neighborhoods under the shadow of the Chicago El; no one has ever done it better, and maybe never will. Pulaski's must be the finest stories, in every way, that could be done about tenement life in Brooklyn. Pound said something along the lines that poetry should be at least as good as prose. The opposite could be said of both Pulaski and Dybek: this is prose as dense, evocative, and multi-referential as poetry. But even here, in these brilliant moving stories of immigrant working neighborhoods, Poles, Italians, Jews, Hispanics, people most, one might think, caught in and close to the real conditions of this country, the reader comes away with—and I don't mean to suggest this writing is at all precious—knowing best, admiring most, being most touched by and only connected to the eye of, this single writer who knows the place up and down, has every piece of language to tell its tale with, his language, its language, its people, intimately, its smells, sights, flavors—but who escaped, flies over it now, taking us with him, an angelic visitor.

[12] CHILDHOOD AND OTHER NEIGHBORHOODS, by *Stuart Dybek*. The Ecco Press. $8.50p.

[13] THE ST. VERONICA GIG STORIES, by *Jack Pulaski*. Zephyr Press. $15.95.

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C.B. COX

# Jane Austen as Free Spirit

BEFORE I READ TONY TANNER'S ILLUMINATING NEW BOOK[1] on Jane Austen, and before I settled down to write this review, I re-read *Persuasion*, which I've not looked into for at least ten years. This proved a great mistake. Seduced by the ease and fluency of Jane Austen's style, I could not help reacting adversely to a certain heaviness and Leavis-like moralizing in Tanner's prose. And I lost confidence that I could do any better myself.

Among great novelists Jane Austen is supreme in resisting literary criticism. Her playful wit, her trenchant irony, so often turn turgid when translated into detailed analysis of her themes. When her novels are so clear and sparkling, why read commentaries? Virginia Woolf once confessed that "of all great writers," she found Jane Austen "the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness." In his Introduction to his Casebook collection of essays, B.C. Southam writes:

> Somehow, the ease and familiarity of Jane Austen's tone and style, the modesty and unpretentiousness of her performance, disarm us, leave us more inclined to enthuse about her superb comic effects, her marvellous characterisation, her shafts of wit, than to approach her with the methodical analysis of formal criticism.

Formal critics, of course, have not failed to subject her fiction to rigorous examination, and in recent years have produced exegeses of high quality, but invariably there seems something uncertain or defensive or extravagant in the adopted critical style.

As Jane Austen dramatizes the intense egotisms and passions of the domestic scene, there is always a lightness of tone in her writing, a freedom of mind separate from events. She is a free spirit, slightly distant from the characters she most admires, even Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot. The marriages that end her novels complete a process of enlightenment for her heroines in which individual desire comes to terms with social reality. Jane Austen's prose celebrates a comparable marriage of strong feeling to intellectual reflection, what Avrom Fleishman has called a synthesis of Romantic verve and Augustan restraint. Many readers have been shocked

[1] JANE AUSTEN, by *Tony Tanner*. Harvard University Press. $20.00; $8.95.

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by this restraint. Those who dislike her fiction often stoop to vituperation. D.H. Lawrence reviled her as "a narrow-gutted spinster," while Kingsley Amis described *Mansfield Park* as "an immoral book" in which Edmund and Fanny are "morally detestable."

Those who admire her are also often reduced to sensational language. Behind her irony and wit, her abstractions and definitions of moral principle, they discern a passionate nature which they can expose only by violent language and analogies. The most famous example is D.W. Harding's *Scrutiny* article, "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen." Harding believes that Jane Austen "detests" her society, and his phrase "regulated hatred" has been copied in a thousand student essays. Brigid Brophy talks of the "aggressive frenzy" with which Jane Austen "smashed" the earlier models of novel-writing, while Marvin Mudrick talks of "lethal irony." Q.D. Leavis says that *Mansfield Park* is as full of prophetic ironies as *Macbeth* and that "the Mansfield stage is finally as strewn with corpses of ruined lives as the stage at the end of *Hamlet* with dead bodies." This kind of language is gloriously out of tune with Jane Austen's achievement. The sensational style breaks down the barriers and limits of decorum which Jane Austen prized as essential for her freedom, for her clarity and self-control.

Tony Tanner has written an outstanding book on Jane Austen, but he too finds difficulty in establishing an appropriate critical discourse. On occasions he uses violent language. In *Northanger Abbey* he quotes the famous reproach to Catherine when Henry Tilney discovers her ridiculous suspicion that his father has killed his wife: "Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them?" Tanner comments that General Tilney's cruelty to Catherine is just as "atrocious" as a murder: "There are atrocities and atrocities and they can take on domestic and social forms without thereby ceasing to be atrocities." Tanner is right, but the language seems inappropriate. Jane Austen manages to shock us by dramatizing the cruelty of General Tilney or Mrs. Norris or Sir Walter Elliot without losing a certain kind of civilized urbanity. She knows that such evil is commonplace. Perhaps the best criticism of her work is to be found in W.H. Auden's famous lines from "Letter to Lord Byron":

> You could not shock her more than she shocks me;
> Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass.
> It makes me most uncomfortable to see
> An English spinster of the middle class
> Describe the amorous effects of 'brass,'
> Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
> The economic basis of society.

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The modern critic is shocked by her clarity about the nature of evil, a clarity which enables her to free herself from her own society. As Tanner says: "In fact Jane Austen partly remains within the ideology of her class and partly (and increasingly) transcends it."

Tanner often admits that his analogies are not altogether happy. After he has compared *Northanger Abbey* to *Heart of Darkness*, he concludes: "I am not suggesting that General Tilney is comparable with Kurtz . . ." After saying that *Sense and Sensibility* looks forward to Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, he admits nervously: "This is not to suggest—rare thought—that Jane Austen was an early Freudian . . ." He draws interesting parallels between Marianne's psychosomatic illness and Foucault's comments on madness, civilization and sensibility, but once again acknowledges his excess: "I have gone to some lengths to introduce Foucault's imaginative perspectives on the later eighteenth century, not to advance the absurd theory that Marianne is a raving lunatic, but . . ."

Tanner explains that he is offering a reading of the novels not a contribution to scholarship. He "invites" us "to consider" a variety of analogues which he himself treats with some scepticism. He compares Jane Austen to a cluster of European writers and philosophers (Defoe, Henry James, Nietzsche or Adorno) but draws attention to the exaggerations. This self-conscious anxiety about definition can sometimes annoy the reader and there are some repetitions, but I see these tricks of style, the continual parentheses and hesitations, mainly as a virtue. Tanner is trying to develop a language which does justice to the breadth of implication communicated by Jane Austen's clear and persuasive style.

This self-consciousness towards his own language is carried over into his analyses of Jane Austen's discourse. In his opening chapter he contends that what matters in a work of art is not the degree or kind of referentiality or content: "Rather it is the writer's moral relation to language. The overriding concern of Jane Austen's novels—and of many of her heroines—is the nature of true utterance." In her novels, he continues, language is everywhere abused, often to cruel and terrible ends. Just as thoughtless language can be an insidious destroyer of the human, so the most responsible employment of language not only makes for the dignity of the human but has powers and strengths of salvation.

Recent scholarship has shown that Jane Austen was much more aware of contemporary events, debates and issues, of wars and domestic unrest, of the results of the Industrial Revolution and of radical change in the constitution of English society than old-fashioned views allowed. She saw her society threatened, Tanner insists, but mainly from the inside. In her early fiction, good manners and morals and right speech are seen as essential to the preservation of order in society. Propriety of gesture and utterance are necessary for the maintenance of peace and stability, and the marriages of

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Elizabeth and Darcy, Emma and Knightley or Fanny and Edmund celebrate the true redemption of society through aesthetic embodiment of the best values.

Tanner demonstrates how Jane Austen's language reflects the balanced harmony of these exemplary marriages:

> The prose tends to balance out into patterns of antithesis and parallelism. Emotion is thus not denied but contained by her rhetoric. In general she mutes, excludes or eludes any kind of violence in her discourse. If she avoids over-direct expression, excessive and potentially distracting particularity, striking metaphors, too markedly arresting peculiarity and idiosyncracy of individuation, and tends always towards the conceptual, the general, the communal, the sense and values which should be held 'in common', this is because she is constantly enacting and re-creating a requisite decorum and propriety in her language.

This splendid account of Jane Austen's prose throws light on that richness and balance in her work which other critics have found so difficult to describe. Like Jane Austen in her prose, her heroines do not deny their passions but learn to contain them in the social boundaries to which they are limited.

At times I feel Tanner undervalues the freedom Jane Austen and her heroines achieve through this characteristic discourse. In *Sense and Sensibility*, he draws attention to the scene when Marianne shows to Elinor the letter from Willoughby disclaiming any understanding between them, and "almost screamed in agony." Like many readers, Tanner wonders if by marrying Marianne to Colonel Brandon Jane Austen was not perhaps defending herself against her own creation, stamping out her own romantic sensibilities. For Tanner the true Marianne in effect by the end of the novel has died. This view underrates the values of rational self-control enacted by Jane Austen's prose. She is not afraid to suggest that a young woman passionately in love with a worthless but handsome young man will be much happier if she marries an older man, reliable, honest and loving, if less sexually exciting. The end is offensive to romantic fantasy and indeed Brandon is not well-realized in the novel, but the clarity of the prose, its discipline and good sense, enact the values he represents.

According to Tanner, the confidence of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* in the re-establishment of order through the old pieties and verities of the morally enlightened upper class who take their duties to property and propriety seriously diminishes as Jane Austen moves forward to *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*. She begins to realize that the true honesty of utterance she admires is threatened by incorrigible and unassimilable forms of society from which the heroine can only withdraw. Tanner has no reservations

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about the greatness of *Mansfield Park*, and argues that Jane Austen is fully justified in allowing Fanny to inherit the order and security of the great house. In *Mansfield Park* he finds a major shift of sensibility. As conservative social values are undermined by the materialism of Henry and Mary Crawford, Fanny represents the values of immobility, tranquillity and restraint. The Crawfords are stylists, and Tanner follows Lionel Trilling in interpreting the amateur theatricals as a means whereby they can explore and experiment with other selves. Jane Austen always uses abstractions with power and certainty and fine discrimination, and in *Pride and Prejudice* these virtues are combined with the playfulness and wit, the exuberance of Elizabeth, but in *Mansfield Park* she now fears that anarchy of language and manners are debasing and devaluing all signifiers. Fanny's debility indicates that the old values are losing ground against the new forms of materialistic energy. Tanner's treatment of *Mansfield Park* is most persuasive, and a justification for his method of exegesis.

In *Emma*, Knightley stands for stasis, clarity, traditional routine and a kind of deep-rooted dutifulness. He never wastes or squanders a word. Tanner shows how the concluding marriage leaves the lovers more isolated from society than in *Pride and Prejudice*, for already Jane Austen is more pessimistic about society's ability to renew its vital bondings and ordering power.

Tanner believes this pessimism develops even further in *Persuasion*, and here I think he goes too far. He says that in this new post-Waterloo society what is striking is the absence of any real center or principle of authority. All signifiers have become detached from the signified, and the dream of *Pride and Prejudice* of a union of property and propriety is abandoned: "For 'rank' in this book does not betoken a responsible authoritative position in society: it signifies only itself. It is rigidifying self-reifying system—signifying nothing." An obvious example is Mr. Elliot, whose urbane use of language is treacherously misleading.

All this is partly true, but Tanner's interpretation does not do full justice to the way Anne's vision dominates the novel. Although honest values now reside mainly in naval personnel, such as the delightful Admiral Croft and his wife, rather than in the aristocracy, Anne's marriage to Wentworth represents a triumph of individual integrity over social form. Jane Austen always placed most emphasis on this kind of renewal through clarity of consciousness rather than on the limiting powers of social fragmentation.

In *Jane Austen and Education*, D.D. Devlin refers to Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* to illustrate the kind of enlightenment, the movement from fantasy to knowledge, achieved by the heroines: "It is in the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists." For Jane Austen to love someone is to know him in his actuality, his authentic existence, and to adapt one's own individuality to this context.

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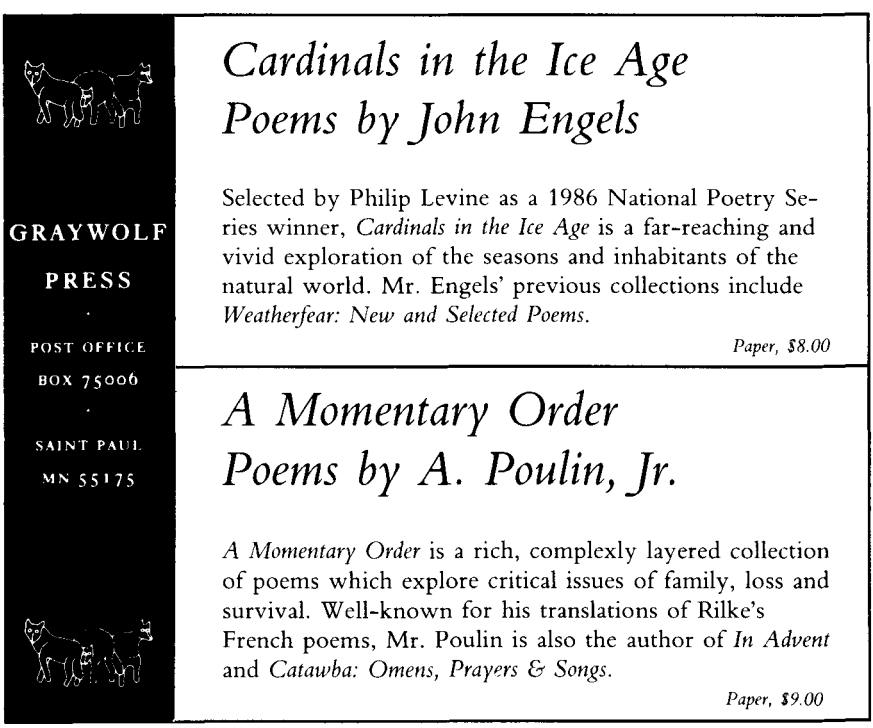
Tanner concludes his book with a chapter on the incomplete *Sanditon*, over whose sick society he feels Jane Austen can exercise no authorial control. We cannot know how *Sanditon* would have developed, but I'm convinced that Jane Austen would have maintained through her discourse the soul's power to transcend society. Her heroines find liberty in marriage; Jane Austen created her own living space, her own freedom of mind, through the clarity of her art.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HARRY GOLDGAR

# Emily Dickinson's Wrestle with God

THE EARLIER EMILY DICKINSON MYTH DIED HARD: she was the slightly dotty small-town recluse, clad invariably in white, spurned by some never quite identified lover, naively pouring forth her full heart, like Shelley's untutored skylark, in profuse (and most mystifyingly punctuated) strains of unpremeditated art. Perpetuated by her nieces and their descendants, it was the myth of the early biographies, persisting even into the mid-1970s when it was faintly echoed by a fragile Julie Harris, solitary on a big stage, *Belle of Amherst* in William Luce's acting version. In the meantime, though, Thomas H. Johnson's three-volume variorum edition of the poems had come out in 1955, putting an end to the family wrangling over what was to be published and to all the corrupt texts, and with those nearly 2,000 poems available, together with the three-volume edition of Dickinson's letters edited by Johnson that appeared in 1958, the scholars, critics, and historians could begin to reconstruct the "real" Emily Dickinson.

So in recent decades there has been a spate of biographies—and a spate of "real" Emilys. The present critical biographer[1] began as a guide at the Dickinson House in Amherst. She observed that visitors, many of whom knew the poetry intimately, seldom asked questions about the work. "They want to know about the *woman.*" Her answers to their questions have been expanded to a demanding 600-page study of the woman and her art that is the most absorbing and convincing yet to appear.

Professor Wolff shows, first of all, that Dickinson's choice of a career as poet instead of marriage and family—the conventional, virtually the only, choice for the daughter of the most prominent lawyer of Amherst and granddaughter of the founder of Amherst College—was deliberate, self-conscious, and sophisticated. More intelligent by far than her coevals, ignored by an emotionally pinched father whose conception of woman's role was one of cooking, washing, and nursing the sick, superbly educated (for that time and place) at Amherst Academy and a year at Mount Holyoke Seminary, refusing conversion to the extremely doctrinaire Trinitarian Congregationalism that surrounded her, she was gifted with a "command over words" that "gave her the means to craft a uniquely

[1] EMILY DICKINSON, by *Cynthia Griffin Wolff.* Alfred A. Knopf. $25.00.

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powerful adult identity," a "uniquely privileged self." Around 1850, when she was about twenty, the die was cast. She had led a normal, lively girlhood among a wide circle of friends of both sexes and a loving brother and sister; there had been beaux and crushes. There was no "crisis" or disruption of her life that culminated in spinsterhood, no lover's rejection that sent her into a tailspin, no dramatic renunciation of the world: she knew that marriage would "swallow up her independence and autonomy," and she had no taste for a career as someone's wife.

It was a brave, bold, and characteristic decision. In the deepest sense, it was one of her proud rebellions: there were others. Already, in the mid-1840s, during the great revival meetings that had swept western New England, she had "refused faith." "Not yet twenty," Wolff says, "Emily Dickinson elected the path of *Non Serviam.*" In closely documented pages, Wolff explores the meaning and consequences of such an election for a young girl in Amherst, a late Puritan stronghold in the middle of the nineteenth century, a "Bible-centered society" far removed from the great secular (or Unitarian) cities of Boston and New York, suffused with "persistent habits of mind and categories of thought that had begun to vanish elsewhere in the country."

It was a theocentric society whose attitudes toward life and death saturated Emily Dickinson's poetry even while she rebelled against them. Once having established the peculiar cultural milieu, Wolff turns from biography to the poems. Her close readings of those hundreds of poems in which Dickinson "wreaks vengeance upon the Deity by exposing His frauds," in which she "challenges God's claim to sovereignty," even attempts to "wrest dominion from the Deity altogether," form the strong central section and the thematic core of her book. Her image for this enterprise is Jacob's wrestling match with the angel in Genesis. "Pugilist and Poet" Dickinson called Jacob in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson (who had encouraged her but had not published any of her poems); Professor Wolff takes the epithet as a catchword for this investigation.

Dickinson's mission, to wrestle with and defeat a brutal and savage God, was certainly individual, but Wolff believes that she intended to be a "representative" poet, viewing her subjects "New Englandly," while at the same time she had to cope with the distinctly nineteenth-century problem of the woman-as-poet. It was a complicated situation, which the well-known "I would not paint—a picture—" expresses. Her response is to invent several voices, each "a calculated tactic": the voice of the child, the "wife's" voice, the proleptic voice (i.e., the voice from beyond the grave), and other combinations and variations. The struggle with God is central to all the voices; the inevitability and futility of decay and death, the Deity's masterstroke against us, is as often the burden of all the voices as it was the preoccupation of real-life Amherst—"eclipse" is a favorite word.

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Wolff examines the familiar "I heard a fly buzz—when I died—" and "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," as instances of the many poems that rage against annihilation and the impossibility of understanding it. All the voices, she says, "perceive the 'self' as in constant peril of violation or disintegration; all look upon life as a process of pain, threatened with cosmic wounding and limited by the absolute blow of physical demise; . . . all originate in a need to compensate for the indifference, inadequacies, or hostilities of an absent God." The poems about death are in any conventional mid-nineteenth-century sense sacrilegious, even blasphemous, and clearly unpublishable. The editors whom Dickinson tentatively approached—Higginson of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Samuel Bowles of the Springfield *Republican*—obviously couldn't run them. And anyhow, "Like Melville, Dickinson was an anachronism. Writing rebelliously, but writing nonetheless within the great tradition of latter-day Puritanism, Emily Dickinson was a time-traveler from an earlier epoch. She was determined to construe writing as an heroic undertaking, literature as the vehicle for epic activity; if such were not the case, poetry would not be worth pursuing." The editors, men of the marketplace, were courteous, sympathetic, and generally uncomprehending.

If many poems deal with the harsh God of the Old Testament, others concern the promises and premises of the New. Wolff discusses "That after Horror—that 'twas *us*—," the last stanza of which Dickinson enclosed in a letter to Higginson (who was on a South Carolina battlefield) in 1862:

> In traditional Christianity, mankind's first sin provides the defining category for the human condition. We are a "fallen" race, a "postlapsarian" breed. Yet Emily Dickinson had other criteria to assess our state. We have been abandoned by the Father: this is primary, fundamental to our misery. And in this vulnerable, bereft condition, we have been exposed to a "Horror," the bestial blood-lust of a God Who required the execution of His own blameless Son. We have witnessed the unspeakable appetite of God the Father; we have witnessed the excruciating death of God the Son. We are that "*after Horror.*"

It is a poem, she continues, of "the final moments of Christ's hold over our collective imagination, the twilight of the Christian era."

That may give some of the flavor of Cynthia Wolff's tough readings of the more cryptic poems. The interpretations may be extreme, the language intemperate, for some admirers of Dickinson's poetry. When she writes, a little later, "Thus it was the blood rite of the Crucifixion and not the glory of the Resurrection that cast its decisive shadow over Dickinson's poetry," some may ask, "Is this really the author of 'Success is counted sweetest' and 'A narrow fellow in the grass'?" Can it be that the bride-of-Christ tradition fuses with the novel of seduction in "Because I could not stop for

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Death—"? Indeed, there may be, now and then, a mild tendency to overread. For the most part, I find Wolff's *explications de texte* wholly persuasive. She is perhaps least convincing when most Freudian, as when speaking of "God's phallic brutality" or, in commenting on one of the winter landscape poems, "As Frost is best conceived," she concludes that it is based upon the castrating wound that Jacob received in his wrestle with the angel, and furthermore that ". . . the 'Gash,' the 'Blackened countenance,' the 'crease,' even the 'stain' (to suggest menstruation)—all recall the external female sexual organs." But she is rarely Freudian. (In her earlier pages, she relies on certain child psychologists and analysts in discussing the infant Emily's "eye/face discourse" with her mother to make the point that "although she was a supreme craftsman of the *word*, she consistently construed verbal communication as only second best to seeing." But there is no psychobabble in her book.)

Dickinson's metaphysics, then—F.O. Matthiessen long ago commented that her poems are "authentically in the metaphysical tradition"—is opposed to the notion of a benevolent supernatural force in nature. Wolff shows just how grim the nature poems really are. While her Amherst contemporaries were perceiving "Design" in the natural world and absorbing into it the scientific discoveries of the century, Dickinson, who had had an excellent grounding in mathematics and science at Amherst Academy, was finding God "a savage Scientist Whose natural laws are so obscene that their implications can be appreciated only with the excruciating difficulty and anxiety that the verse engenders." The divine Scientist-Experimenter's vindictiveness toward poets informs, among other poems, "Split the Lark—and you'll find the Music—."

Not the love of the New Testament, but the "profane love" of men and women is Dickinson's subject in some famous poems—and, recluse or not, she knew a lot about it. Wolff's treatment of the love poetry comes as a welcome relief after hundreds of pages about Dickinson's war with God and Jesus. Yet Jacob's wrestle is not absent from it. According to Wolff, lovers' devotion sets them in direct opposition to God. The love poetry, she finds, is about separation, about loss: the pattern concerns "two lovers, perfectly matched and deeply in love, (who) are not permitted to remain together." To illuminate this pattern, she examines Dickinson's relationships in the real world: a lawyer, Ben Newton, who died in 1853; a Philadelphia minister, Charles Wadsworth, to whom she wrote a series of letters; the editor of the Springfield *Republican* (then one of the nation's most influential newspapers), Sam Bowles, actually a more intimate friend of Emily Dickinson's sister-in-law Susan.

Finally, on page 400, we arrive at romance—"her relationship with the one man whom she is known to have loved with passion, the man who returned her feelings in kind, Judge Otis Phillips Lord." Married, childless, living in Salem, "a man of great intelli-

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gence, " Lord was considered by many to be the most brilliant lawyer in Massachusetts. Dickinson probably had been acquainted with him since 1857, but it was only after the death of his wife in 1877 that the relationship became "overtly passionate." They wrote weekly love letters between 1878 and 1882, of which only 15 rough drafts of her letters are extant. She toyed with the notion of marriage to him, but, says the biographer, "deep affection for anyone outside the immediate family and passionate love both *necessarily entail separation*," a conflict she could only resolve by retreating into her solitude. Lord died in 1884. There are drafts of letters of the period 1858-62 hinting at an earlier passion, but the man in the case cannot be identified.

Emily Dickinson's poetry after about 1862, when for an unknown reason she made fair copies of more than 360 poems, reflects, as Professor Wolff demonstrates, or runs parallel to, the growing secularization and commercialism of the United States and of Amherst. The diction becomes much less obviously religious, often "drained of transcendent implication." Many poems, no longer explicitly addressed to the Christian myth, carry only the memory of that myth "in the echoing cadences of language that hesitates at the edge of the modern era, but does not yet accept a thoroughly secular sensibility." This ambivalence explains why readers, even Dickinson experts, are sometimes so baffled that they cannot agree on even the basic subject of a poem like "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—." (Wolff plunges in as usual and offers a masterly interpretation.)

In her later years Dickinson has *won* her wrestle with God. Her mission now is to "investigate the meaning of God's demise" in a demythologized, "post-Christian" world. A new voice emerges, the voice of *experience*, in the poems that define hope, remembrance, longing, and other abstractions, and in a few poems that express simple delight in existence. "However," Wolff comments, "when the semiotic system of latter-day American Puritanism finally lost its hold over the creative imagination, only the broken shards of magnificence remained. Grandeur had gone. Under these diminished circumstances, even Emily Dickinson's best work could be no more than elegant, isolated gems."

But wait! There's more. In her closing pages Wolff shows that Dickinson by the early 1870s had won through to a new poetry of faith. This, we are now surprised to learn, is the real drama of her life. She had spent long years wrestling with God, seeking the meaning of life and especially of death. Now it all turns out to have been "a long pilgrimage to faith." Even death, perhaps, "is not a unique loss, but merely one additional stage of growth—both for the deceased and for those left behind. . . . " Though there are poems to illustrate it, this seems the least convincing link in a strongly argued chain of evidence. There is an uneasy impression that the happy ending is a bit forced.

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Was it worth it?—that renunciation of life for art? "Or has life been as ruthlessly consumed by the imperative to create art as the orchard's 'Attar' [in the "Oriole" poems, "One of the ones that Midas touched" and "This was a poet"] was consumed by the robber-bird? . . . Is it better to have been a poet—even a very great poet—than merely to have lived a full life in the ordinary way?" Of course there is no firm answer. We may suppose that Emily Dickinson would have made the same choices again. She died in 1886 confidently expecting her posthumous fame—and, ironically, it began almost immediately when her relatives began to rummage through her papers.

This is a heavyweight biography, eloquently written, magnificently researched and, in the critical and exegetical sections that are its heart, magnificently argued. There may never be a "definitive" Emily Dickinson, but for now, Cynthia Wolff's version of her seems far to surpass all others.

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MARK JARMAN

# A Scale of Engagement, from Self to Form Itself

IN HER LATEST COLLECTION,[1] Marilyn Hacker uses the sonnet, much as Lowell did in *Notebook*, more as a section in a sequence than as a poem in itself. She tells the story of a failed love affair, but her real subject is herself. The strictness of the sonnet and the demands of the sonnet sequence and the other complex forms Hacker employs do not constrain her from self-exposure.

> First, I want to make you come in my hand
> while I watch you and kiss you, and if you cry,
> I'll drink your tears while, with my whole hand, I
> hold your drenched loveliness contracting . . .

The story is of an older woman's love for a younger one, and the above passage is like many in the poems. Curiously, one of the few poems with a title, "Lesbian Ethics, or: Live Girl-Girl Sex Acts," invites us to consider the difference between the erotic and the pornographic. Lesbian ethics, as they are described, sound like any ethical sexual behavior; the lovers are waiting to be free before they can be together. And yet, the subject of some pornography aimed at the heterosexual market *is* "girl-girl sex acts." The healthy animal spirits of Hacker's love poems are, I presume, supposed to circumvent this dilemma.

The success of the sequence is not, however, its erotic motif but its representation of the dailiness of being in love. Hacker chronicles eating, drinking, living in New York City, sharing poems, teaching, raising her teenage daughter, traveling to France, mourning the death of a friend, all with her lover Rachel beside her or on her mind, until the final days of the affair. This journalistic approach is also found in Lowell's first version of *Notebook*; in a similar fashion, we see less a form taking shape than a form of person, the person of the poet, in Hacker's case, the poet in love. It is Hacker's gift to give us this in a kind of sensual fullness, that includes sex, but also includes banality and produces questions. Why do the lovers spend so much time apart? Just what brings about the end of

[1] LOVE, DEATH, AND THE CHANGING OF THE SEASONS, by *Marilyn Hacker*. Arbor House. $7.95p.

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the affair, which is terminated cruelly ("Who would divorce her lover with a phone / call? You did.")? What this sort of poetry requires is that the character of the poet engage us, for that is clearly what engages the poet herself. All of the woman at this time in her life is illuminated by her passion, which means depths and heights, the sublime and the ridiculous, are all present in this unique book.

> We do get headaches, but we don't get cramps.
> We take less than a half an hour to dress;
> need: pockets, details, stuffs that please the touch.
> We do it once like ladies, once like tramps.
> We love each other very very much.
>
> "Symbiose II"

Like Marilyn Hacker, Richard Katrovas in his second book[2] has himself for his own best subject—or, rather, favorite subject. Actually, he is best when, writing about the marginal people of New Orleans (streetwalkers, transvestites, tourist hustlers), he marginalizes himself and brings to bear the art of pathos he has learned from James Wright. One of the most powerful poems in the first New Orleans section of the book is "I Feel," about overhearing a woman trying to explain herself to an outraged male companion, perhaps her pimp.

> Whatever she has done,
> it doesn't warrant his
> restrained passion,
> his noble posturing
> which is utterly absurd.
>
> Besides, whether they can
> acknowledge it or not, I
> am part of this,
> and I don't want to hear
> her tell him what she feels.

The role in which Katrovas announces his active emotional participation is extended sometimes to heroic or mock-heroic lengths. In one poem he describes beating up a stalker ("to them the earth is packed with angels who hate them"), then shaking hands with the woman who has enlisted his help; in another he helps a woman vomit in a gutter by putting his fingers down her throat; in "The Waiter" he serves a newlywed couple in a restaurant and "divine[s] their marriage will not last." In all these situations, he presents himself as a locus of moral authority and genuine feeling. This can

[2] SNUG HARBOR, by *Richard Katrovas*. Wesleyan University Press. $17.00; $8.95.

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grow a bit thick, as when in "Meeting Yevtushenko, July, 4, 1985" he measures himself against the Russian media-star: "I address him / as I would any other mortal / who has not had time to piss me off / or earn my reverence." He claims that he has developed this attitude because he has lived "so long / in Southern California / where everyone I knew / had star potential." But the tough guy shtick is pure Charles Bukowski, who's lived there a long time, too.

Nevertheless, *Snug Harbor* is a compelling book and it is precisely because of the persona in these poems—although I am beginning to think that persona in the modern sense hardly applies to the typical autobiographical lyric today. The claim the speaker of Katrovas' poems makes is that they are records of the authentic experience of Richard Katrovas. There are attempts to make mythic allusion out of the life of New Orleans, as in "Kings' Day, 1984" where three transvestites are seen as the Magi ("I imagine they are / bearing gifts to celebrate the birth / of something conceived in a glass beaker . . . / I burn with hope like a star."). But the best of the poems are the most realistic.

Ruth Fainlight has a less theatrical sense of herself than Hacker and Katrovas, but like them she makes herself the center of her poems in this, her seventh, volume.[3] The difference in Fainlight is that we are in the presence of someone engaged in understanding herself as an artist more than anything else.

> What I am working at and want to perfect—
> my project—is the story of myself: to have it
> clear in my head, events consecutive,
> to understand what happened and why it happened.
> "Author! Author!"

The author of these poems engages herself on any number of levels, in any number of ways, from the aging of her own body, to her interest in the classical world, to her Jewish background, to being an average citizen of London who encounters a madwoman on the street. She is especially moving in her role as a daughter and as a mother, and as a sister, the elegist for her departed brother. The range of situations played out in her poems gives us a much fuller sense of a human being, in fact, than do Hacker's or Katrovas'. Recalling an event during her childhood, when her father was away at war, she tells how her mother used her as a shield in public so that she could mend a torn stocking.

> Her flushed face. My harsh stern eye. My impulse
> to hurt and to love, towards and away. That rainy
> winter day, my mother and I determined

[3] FIFTEEN TO INFINITY, by *Ruth Fainlight*. Carnegie-Mellon University Press. $6.95p.

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a future no peace-time knowledge can assuage.
"War-Time"

Addressing her brother on the day of his burial, she writes,

Harry, I know how much you would have enjoyed it.
I can see your mouth's ironic curve as the heavens
opened. The umbrella over my head was almost
useless—rain and hail at the same slant
as your amused imagined gaze darkened
the side of my coat and trousers.
"The Storm"

And in the book's title poem, she describes her son's growing up in terms of his mastery of the camera and its f-stop.

. . . time
expands around you like the dizzying
crown of the tree and sky above:
fifteen to infinity.

To my mind, a poet with this warm sense of others, who at the same time hopes to recognize herself, is the lyric poet at her most mature. Fainlight's career has taken place in England, although she is an American. The English claim her, but it is a valuable service of CMU Press to publish her latest English book in this country, and American poets might do well to read it. Straightforwardness is a trait I have always valued in our poetry and missed in poetry from across the Atlantic. Lately, I miss it in ours, but find it in the work of this expatriate.

Robert Wrigley's poems in his third book[4] attempt to move closer to the experience itself, than to the self who had the experience, hence his narratives tend to be emblematic and at times obscure; the speaker is sometimes a persona (an arsonist in "Lover of Fire," a firefighter in "Volunteers") and sometimes a fictional narrator as in the baffling "The Secret Life in Every Living Thing." This access to the other and movement toward stricter formal considerations characterize the move along the scale I have devised from the poet's concern with himself to a greater concern for his poem's form. Consider how many of Wrigley's poems are about animals. The titles alone tell a good deal, "The Bees," "Nightcrawlers," "Termites," "The Beliefs of a Horse," "Fireflies," "Pheasant Hunting," "The Skull of a Snowshoe Hare," "The Owl." The animal has a moral purpose in poetry, as in all literature, but in the lyric, too, it has the

[4] MOON IN A MASON JAR, by *Robert Wrigley*. University of Illinois Press. $8.95p.

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romantic purpose of accepting the self's projections, and, in my view, it offers a form.

> I found it in the woods, moss-mottled,
> hung at the jaws by a filament
> of leathery flesh. We have painted it
> with Chlorox, bleached it
> in that chemical sun, boiled loose
> the last tatters of tissue
> and made of it an heirloom,
> a trophy, a thing that lasts, death's
> little emissary to an eight-year-old boy.
> "The Skull of a Snowshoe Hare"

I hope it is fair to say that Wrigley belongs at the heart of the American tradition that takes country things and the understanding of them for the heart of experience itself. His is neither an urban nor an urbane poetry; I do not mean to assign a plus sign to this side of the issue (country + city −), but merely to characterize. Admittedly, the possibilities inherent when the isolation of the country and the human intersect are rich ones, and Wrigley makes the most of them. One of the best poems is the very first (it was reading this that made me want to read the entire book). On a deserted road at night in the Ozarks a family car collides with a chicken truck. Apparently only a small boy, the speaker, survives.

> I walked, in the almost black of Ozark night,
> the moon just now burning into Missouri.
> Behind me, the chickens followed my lead,
> some fully upright, pecking
>
> the dim pavement for suet or seed,
> some half-hobbled by their wounds . . .
> "Moonlight: Chickens on the Road"

Being drawn to the emblematic in imagery or narrative is, to me, not unlike being drawn to form itself or putting first the formal properties of a thing. This can lead to detachment in the writer, and for those who enjoy their poetry with the poet's full presence announced in every line, it may leave them cold. But Wrigley can follow his inclination with great feeling, as in the book's most beautiful poem, "Appalonea." Discovering the name of a forgotten relative leads him to a moving passage of association.

> Apotheosis
> of appellations, a plum of pure sound.
> Apollo, Apollonius, Apollinaire . . .

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that strong grayish horse
across the field: Appaloosa,
a portrait but not a picture,
a prize, a poem, Appalonea.

Michael Collier is even more concerned with the form of his poems than Wrigley, and many of them in this first book[5] are organized around a central image. This keeps his poems shorter, under greater control, and clarifies the emblematic nature of narrative when it appears. Not only do his poems rely on a central image, often they are constructed around a conceit, and this frame of mind flickers with Collier's wit, which is impressive. The first poem, "Ancestors," plays both on the meaning of the poet's surname and on his forebears' profession—they were dentists.

These most intimate colliers,
with drill and bit and whir,
black slag of old amalgam,
the sear and singe of pulp.
They wanted to come as close
as they could to the fleshy rose
pulsing in the root like the heart's
faintest hint.

The challenge to such an imagination is to transform unpromising material. If Donne could turn a flea into a priest, then Collier can transform himself into a fishing lure to angle for his father, as he does in "White Bass"; if Herbert can make his collar into a protest against his vocation, and God's call, Collier in his title poem can see an example of his own art in a serpentine necklace of pearls. He is clearly more interested in the dimensions of his subject, that is, its *form*, than in his own personality. This is not to say that personal concerns do not exist in the book. Collier is such a clean and scrupulous writer that we can find them—one being the memory of his father, already mentioned in "White Bass" and also dealt with in "The Point of No Return," "The Bird Feeders," and "Flyer."

What has a poet like this to give his reader, if it is not going to be the whole man, alive and in person and the star of these poems? His wit is one, of course, his ability to make connections, and—even though the alliteration sounds corny—it's his wisdom, too. The single most powerful poem in *The Clasp* is "Bruges." Its imagery is transfixing, and the news it brings is that "there is no way past" death. News like this is hard to bear. Collier's poetry makes it bearable.

[5] THE CLASP AND OTHER POEMS, by *Michael Collier*. Wesleyan University Press. $16.00; $7.95.

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Alice Fulton's second book[6] is divided into six sections, each headed with a different definition of "palladium," running from the element to the music hall to the Trojan statue of Pallas Athena. The definition is the form her poems most often take; as if in acknowledgement that a single thing or word can have many meanings, she attempts to give as many as she can think up. For her all the fun's in how you name a thing. In this, her guiding genius is Marianne Moore. Although Fulton's exuberance is not as strictly controlled as Moore's, it could be argued that the great Modernist's elaborate syllabic forms were disguises for a chaos of associations. Like Moore's poems, which she called her "things," Fulton's poems are also things, rather amazing ones, too.

They can include fanciful guidebooks to the lifestyles of hell ("Orientation Day in Hades") and phantasmagoric trips through contemporary underworlds as in "The Body Opulent." She is savvy about female and male forms of identity, in "Fictions of the Feminine" and "Men's Studies: *Roman de la Rose.*" I like her poems best for the way they say a thing, as in these lines from "Everyone Knows the World is Ending."

> Everyone knows the world is ending.
> Everyone always thought so, yet
> Here's the world.

Or the pun that closes "Days Through Starch and Bluing" ("Tomorrow's pressing."). I would like to show how Fulton puts a poem together, because a reader can get lost and one poem can seem very much like another, as if the associations lined up in poem A could just as well have worked in poem B, but her poems are long and complex. Two brief passages will have to do.

> born gorgeous with nerves, with brains
> the pink of silver polish or
> jellyfish wafting ornately
> through the body below.
> An invertebrate cooing
> on the mother
> tongues shushes and lulls them into thinking
> all is well.
>
> "Babies"

> We feel
> heavily unconscious, submerged in colors dense
> as chloroform, distant

[6] PALLADIUM, by *Alice Fulton*. University of Illinois Press. $8.95p.

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effervescent riffles, the roar of boulders in a whirlpool,
slight sandy agitations.

"Obsessions"

The subject of the first passage is clear in the title, but the second is not.

Reviewing her first book I complained that the poems were often overwritten. They still are, but to say so is also to object puritanically to their abundance. This long book covers quite a bit of ground, some of the best of it focused on Fulton's own family, mother and aunts, her father, and Troy, New York, her hometown, which she mythifies with a gossamer touch ("We loved a ruin"). As good company as these poems are, they are best when we can, to paraphrase Marianne Moore, admire what we understand.

Oh, you will never know me. I wave and you go
on playing in the clouds
boys clap from erasers. I am the pebble
you tossed on the chalked space and war-
danced toward, one-leg two-leg, arms treading air.

"Fierce Girl Playing Hopscotch"

David Lehman's poetry[7] reminds me of the story about the two vaudeville comics who were working on their act. Mike tells Maish a joke, to which Maish responds, "It sounds contrived." Surprised, Mike says, "I just contrived it!" There's a just-contrived feeling about Lehman's very carefully wrought poetry, a spontaneity within form that is reminiscent of Stevens and early Frank O'Hara.

X distrusts actions; he has his *is*,
His *was*, which shall be again, when
The jangle of change is spent, the jingle
Of jargon clicks off, and peace in the jungle
Reigns in the tiger's snore, as before.

"Dominant X"

Lehman makes a good deal out of the "jingle of jargon," using as he states in a note, a collage technique of "incorporating echoes and quotations."

"Work shall set you free": a sensible sentiment:
Marx would agree: Freud would give his assent:

Yet take those words and put them on a sign

[7] AN ALTERNATIVE TO SPEECH, by *David Lehman*. Princeton University Press. $15.00; $8.50.

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> And hang that sign upon the gate at Auschwitz,
>
> What happens then: it means "abandon hope all ye who enter here"
>
> "Arbeit Macht Frei"

His feeling for the phrase, especially the debased one, leads him to construct an effective villanelle, like "First Offense" ("I'm sorry officer, I didn't see the sign . . . / The light was green. How much is the fine?") and a pantoum, "Amnesia," with these repeating lines, "The car pulled up and the driver said, 'Get in.' " and " 'Wolves don't criticize sheep,' Cage grinned. 'They eat them.' "

The temper of Lehman's poetry is about as far away from Marilyn Hacker's as one can get within the mode that we might simply call the mainstream lyric. Ironically of all seven poets discussed here, it is Hacker and Lehman who most rigorously engage meter and rhyme, but their aims are totally different. On Lehman's end of the scale, forms of language are much more compelling than roles of the self. With his cerebral interest in clichés, literary modes, stock characters, and the styles of others, Lehman might be called a mannerist. There is nothing visceral in his poetry, nor is there meant to be; it is a superior amusement. It should not be surprising then that one outstanding poem in his volume is titled "The Difference Between Pepsi and Coke." It lists qualities and talents of a person called "Pop" (Fulton might be just as likely to pun on the name and still mean an actual relative).

> Needs no prompting to give money to his kids; speaks
> French fluently, and tourist German;
> Sings Schubert in the shower; plays pinball in Paris;
> knows the new maid steals, and forgives her.

Pop can tell the difference between the two soft drinks, and could surely tell the difference among these seven poets. Even when their aims are similar, they remain distinct from one another.

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# NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

GEORGE WATSON is a Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge and author of *Politics & Literature in Modern Britain* (Macmillan) and *The Idea of Liberalism* (Macmillan). . . . MAUREEN MULLARKEY is a painter who writes on art and culture. . . . DANA GIOIA published his first full-length collection of poetry, *Daily Horoscope*, last year with Graywolf Press. His essay on the revival of formal poetry will appear in an upcoming issue of *The Hudson Review*. . . . ALAN SHAW* lives in New York and works as a freelance writer and translator. His interest in verse drama has resulted in a translation of Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri*, staged in 1984 and published in 1985. . . . HAROLD FROMM lives in North Barrington, Illinois. He expects to revisit Yorkshire this fall to re-explore Brontë territory. . . . PETER J. SMITH's* first novel, *Highlights of the Off-Season*, was published by Simon & Schuster in the fall of 1986. He is twenty-seven and lives in New York City. . . . For the past three years TOM WAYMAN has been involved in creating an independent faculty-run post-secondary writing program, the Kootenay School of Writing, in Vancouver, British Columbia. . . . A. R. AMMONS had two books out this year, both from W. W. Norton. One is an expanded version of his *Selected Poems* and the other is a book of new poems called *Sumerian Vistas*. . . . B. H. FAIRCHILD's* book of poems, *The Arrival of the Future*, won the Swallow's Tale Press poetry competition and was recently published.

PHYLLIS HOGE THOMPSON teaches poetry at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, where she lives. Her book of poems, *The Ghosts of Who We Were*, was published by the University of Illinois Press in 1986. . . . ALICE BLOOM teaches in the Department of English at the University of Maine, Farmington. She is working on a book-length collection of essays. . . . C. B. COX is John Edward Taylor Professor of English Literature at the University of Manchester, England. He has recently been appointed to the Kingman Committee which has just been set up in Britain by the Secretary of State to examine the teaching of English in schools. . . . HARRY GOLDGAR is a lawyer in New Orleans. A former professor of English and comparative literature, he has been book editor at the Nashville *Tennessean* and was an editorial writer for the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. . . . MARK JARMAN's latest book of poetry is *Far and Away* (Carnegie-Mellon University Press). He is co-editor of *The Reaper*, a literary journal, and co-publisher of Story Line Press.

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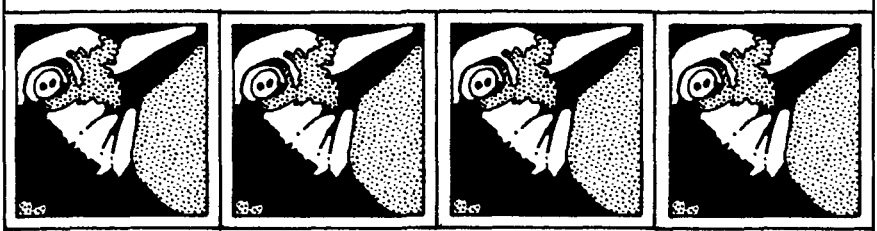

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IN THIS ISSUE;

Did New York City, already soaked in galleries, museums and alternative spaces for contemporary work, *need* another modern art condo? One more indoor strolling place for bon tons and *bon viveurs* with a nervous susceptibility to the aesthetic wallop? That is like asking if San Clemente needs the Nixon Presidential Library. The question of need never arises. Orthodoxy holds that art is good for you, like vitamins, a moral tonic. The truth is—art is good for museums. Scrubbed clean of the impacted sludge of imponderable thoughts, art is a hot property.

—Maureen Mullarkey, "Tuesday at the Met," p. 193.

This edifying sentimentality is one of the keys to Bly's popularity. Most people like sentimental art, as long as its emotions are stylish. The last century sentimentalized tender emotions like love and pity. This Old Sentimentality is now passé. The New Sentimentality prefers other ennobling qualities like alienation, loneliness, and especially sincerity. But traditional or contemporary, the sentimentalist always asks *the reader to experience more emotion than the poem* generates. Poets know that many readers will collaborate in the deception. A few bells will suffice to set off emotions readers want to experience anyway.

—Dana Gioia, "The Successful Career of Robert Bly," p. 207.

Four months after Maria was born Tonio got into his dark yellow GTO with the plates that said "Toros" and in his soft voice said he was going into Hartford to pick up a special coaxial cable for the VCR and that was the last anyone heard of him. My father said he knew all along something like this would happen, the question was when: *cuando*.

—Peter J. Smith, "Life of Beethoven," p. 251.

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